TALKING TO A STRANGER

THOMAS DRESDEN

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/talkingtostrange0000dres

TALKING TO A STRANGER

'Corby's taken off from school tonight . . .'

'She's run away? You don't know where she is?'

'Not at the moment. But it's not the first time.'

'Have the police been informed?' Her father's accent was even stronger than normal, his rumble deeper.

'I'm sure Tom's done what's necessary,' Claire said. 'I must get to bed now.'

'Wait.' His voice softened.' Call the police, kitten.'

'Now don't get melodramatic, Midas.'

'You know that I'm seldom wrong.'

'I know you've been drinking.'

'Even so, such a foreboding must be taken with seriousness.'

'Corby's okay.'

'You ignore my intuition?'

'She's okay, Midas.'

'Then . . .' He paused dramatically . . . '*Requiescat in pace*,' he intoned.

'Don't say that,' she said, but a chill ran down her spine. 'You're being foolish.'

'*Requiescat in pace*,' he repeated harshly.

Again the chill. She was ready to vent her anger but he had already replaced the phone.

TALKING TO A STRANGER

Thomas Dresden

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder and Stoughton

Copyright © 1994 by Thomas Dresden

The right of Thomas Dresden to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in paperback in 1994
by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline PLC

A Coronet paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Dresden, Thomas
Talking to a Stranger
I. Title
823.914 [F]

ISBN 0 340 61705 5

Typeset by Avon Dataset Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd

Hodder and Stoughton Ltd
A division of Hodder Headline PLC
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

The Midas Foundation

The Midas Foundation of New York is the brainchild of Mr Joseph Midasov, a former prisoner himself and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of the Soviet labour camp system.

The object of the Foundation is to preserve for ever a record of the Soviet slave labour economy. In the belief that the labour camps of the USSR will finally be recognised as the source of countless crimes against humanity, the Foundation is building an archive that will provide evidence on which future trials can be based.

To this end it acquires, exhibits and publishes research material on all aspects of the camps.

President:	**Joseph S. Midasov**	New York
Acquisitions Director:	**Dr Claire Garrison**	London

PROLOGUE

On November 3, 1959, the Strict Regime camp at Brogula, on the Kola Peninsula of north-west Russia, was declared officially closed by the Gulag authority in Murmansk. On that morning the prisoners were assembled for the last time on the *appel* square and their names called in the long ceremony that had preceded every workday since the camp was built in the 1930s. The camp flag was lowered and burnt as a signal of the camp's disgrace. The dogs were shot. The prisoners, men and women, were formed up in column of march and the gates opened on squeaking hinges. While guards ran from hut to hut, hurling firebrands through the windows, the final order to march was given.

In the quarter-century of its existence as a Strict Regime gold-mining camp, the numbers at Brogula had remained small. But the turnover was high. The cramped mine-shafts in the frozen hills consumed many thousands of prisoners annually. Men and women died of cold-induced cardiac arrest, tuberculosis, exhaustion and despair. The camp, maintained at nine thousand *zeks*, required some two thousand replacement prisoners per year. For the average prisoner, expectation of life in Brogula was little more than four years. The average sentence to Strict Regime was five to ten years.

The march began to the same shouts from the guards, the

same cracking of whips, to all appearances a march through the Arctic darkness no different from the others the prisoners endured daily. Eight abreast, the column passed through the gates and snaked across the snowfields towards the ridge of the low gold-mining hills. At the head of the column and at intervals throughout its winding length, men carried poles with lanterns attached, so that the swinging yellow lights resembled a religious procession, mocking the ruins of the monastery on the hill.

Some *zeks*, most perhaps, looked back at the watchtowers and the blazing wooden huts within the square kilometre of barbed wire. There were few thoughts for what had been; guards and prisoners alike shared anxieties about the future. No man or woman in the long, winding column knew what that future held. In Gulag dogma they were all guilty, prisoners and guards alike. They had received the lecture often enough: escape was an infection – like cholera or black plague. Escape touched everybody. Escape signalled a dereliction of duty for which all members of a Gulag family must, in fairness, suffer the consequences. And escape had just shattered the once proud, unbroken record of the camp at Brogula.

1

Berkshire, England

The American girl sat in darkness at the window seat, staring out at the dark bulk of Windsor Castle silhouetted against a pale orange skyline that marked the motorway to London. One hand combed through thick russet hair; the other clutched the handle of her duffle bag. Excitement bubbled in her stomach.

Through the half-open classroom door she could hear the voices of her friends as they made their way to their study bedrooms. Without taking her eyes off the outlined trees in front of her, the girl let her hand stray out to feel along the zip of her red duffle. Drawing it open an inch or two she took out a bar of chocolate and snapped off two squares. For a moment she sat upright, her features tensely immobile as she heard the voice of the duty master on the stairs.

'Latin unseens tomorrow,' he was insisting to a group of the seniors. 'Special vocabulary: farming, crops, agricultural implements . . .'

From her position at the window seat the girl could hear her friends groan, could even distinguish Emma Reardon-Smith's groan from the others. They passed further down the corridor, Emma continuing to protest and Ian Davenport's deep voice arguing that they'd had more than adequate time to prepare. It was a ritual. In the end he would make a

concession, no upper-school roll-call this evening, to restore his popularity.

Many nights there was no formal count of seniors. The school was proud of its honour system. It was unlikely anybody would register her absence when the supper bell sounded.

The duty master's voice faded as he passed along the gallery above the Gothic refectory. She relaxed, put the squares of chocolate in her mouth and brushed her pale miniskirt free of any possible crumbs. Jeans would have been more comfortable. But a miniskirt was better for her purpose.

Ten minutes passed. The bell for supper rang. To get clear of the school buildings after dark the rear courtyard gate was vital. Every night it was opened by the caretaker on his tour of inspection and left open for three or four minutes while he went down to the lane at the end of the playing-field. It was these three or four minutes she intended, not for the first time, to use to slip out of the school.

She sat chewing on her lip. By now the caretaker should have emerged from behind the headmaster's house, unlocked the rear courtyard gate and crossed the playing-field, his flashlight reaching for the dark base of the line of trees that ran alongside the lane The senior bedrooms overlooked the trees and the dark lane behind, and it wasn't unusual to find a car, with a lone driver, parked with its lights out. It was a school rule that a girl must pull her curtains before she began undressing.

Tonight the caretaker was late.

Normally you could set your watch by him, but just occasionally he was known to give the lane at the bottom of the playing-field a miss. Then, with no need to go through

the courtyard gate, he would turn on the outside lights and she might as well go back to her study and start learning the Latin for a ploughshare or an oxen team or the art of bee-keeping . . .

She sat, her eyes strained by the mesmeric effect of the great crenellated block of darkness against the orange motorway lights. Disappointment began to damp down her excitement. Soon the halogen wall spots would go on and the place would become like Colditz.

Then suddenly, somewhere in the courtyard below, she could hear the sound of the caretaker's slow footsteps. And moments later a long beam of light reached out and pooled at the base of a brick wall. She watched him cross the courtyard and fumble with his keys to unlock the ornamental iron gate. Leaving it swinging open, he walked out across the playing-field, the flashlight beam jabbing and probing at the darkness ahead.

She jumped up, grabbing her duffle bag. She had already unlocked the fire-escape door. Opening it, she slipped out into the summer night air. For a moment she stared into the darkness.

Then she ran down the iron staircase and across the courtyard and through the gate. The rest was easy. To wait among the trees until the caretaker returned; to listen to him relock the gate and hear his footsteps carrying him back towards the headmaster's house. A warm mist dampened her face. She laughed. She was free.

Running across the playing-field, she crossed the lane and let herself through a wooden gate. Jogging now, her duffle bag hooked over her shoulder, she crossed a broad grazing-meadow then slid carefully down the slope into the deep cutting of the London motorway. From the hard shoulder

she began to hitch, knowing that there were always men who would risk stopping for a miniskirt.

In the house in Old Church Street, Chelsea, the phone was ringing. 'Leave it,' Claire said to her husband. 'This is far more important.'

He moved across the room. 'It might be the embassy.'

'So Grosvenor Square can wait for once.'

'If they call here it's because I'm needed.' He reached for the phone but her hand got there before his. She lifted the receiver and dropped it back in place. Insistently she said: 'I'm asking you, Tom, will you please first call the school?'

Tom Garrison looked down at her. In his off-duty jeans, suede boots and turtleneck sweater he looked younger than he was, looked to be no more than mid thirties. But his face was pale now, with stubborn anger.

'Just make the call to the headmaster or to the duty master,' Claire said, forcing a grinding patience into her voice, 'and tell them, say that your sister is not here.'

'If I do that they'll have half the police forces of London and the Home Counties out looking for her.'

'Good.'

'Listen, Claire,' he said. 'This isn't the first time Corby's gone AWOL and stayed overnight with a friend. We both know that.'

She shook her head. 'First we don't know for sure that's what she's doing. Second, at sixteen years of age . . '

'Nearly seventeen . . .'

' . . she shouldn't feel free just to walk out of school whenever she chooses. Okay, she's a high-spirited American girl and she doesn't take easily to English boarding-school

rules. But the staff there are responsible for the safety of the pupils in their care. Even on the answerphone you can hear the man's worried sick.'

She leaned over and switched on the answering machine.

'I've heard it once,' he said.

'Hear it again.'

An amplified English voice said: 'Mr Garrison. This is Ian Davenport, duty master at St Anthony's. The headmaster has asked me to let you know that Corby is absent from school this evening.' He paused. 'Normally, as you know, we forgo roll-call and operate an honour system. Tonight, however, the headmaster ordered fire drill. At the emergency roll-call Corby was found to be missing. She was certainly here earlier in the evening. I'm sure in itself it's no cause for alarm, Mr Garrison. I assume she's back in London with you It is a disciplinary offence, of course, but our main concern at present is to establish her whereabouts. We believe we can't be too careful these days. Be so kind as to call whatever time you get in. However late. And I do mean however late I shall be waiting for your call '

Claire switched off the machine. 'So call the school, Tom. Please.'

He hesitated. 'You're not really worried about her,' he said.

'Probably not,' Claire said carefully. 'I've no doubt it's as you say, she's taken off and is planning to stay the night with a friend.'

'You just want to get her into hot water.'

'No,' Claire said wearily, 'I just want us to take a stand. It's time Corby faced some of her own music. And .' Claire hesitated then said it anyway . 'there is always just the possibility that she didn't go off with a friend Jesus Christ

the nuts are not all in New York City. There are plenty here. You have to face that.'

'She's with a friend,' he said stubbornly.

The phone rang again.

She glanced down at it. This time it was a reflex, lifting and dropping the receiver in a single action, before the answerphone cut in. It was running through her head like a refrain: Corby mustn't get away with it this time. She said to Tom: 'You have to face it that she might not be with a friend. She might be with someone who's no friend at all.'

He flushed, turned to the drinks cupboard and poured himself a brandy. 'I'll call the school,' he said over his shoulder. 'Storm in a goddamn teacup.' Transferring his brandy to his other hand, he opened the door.

'What's wrong with using this phone?'

'Dammit, Claire,' he exploded. 'I've said I'll call the school. You've got what you want. Isn't that enough? I'll take it upstairs.'

Claire sat staring at the phone. She thought of Corby, mid teens, already approaching spectacular good looks. But flawed. A pseudologue? Is that what psychiatrists called a compulsive liar? She was still staring at the phone. When she heard Tom's muffled voice from his study above, she lifted the receiver with barely more than a twinge of guilt.

He was saying: 'I understand, Mr Davenport. You're right. It isn't the first time. It was thoughtless of her to just walk out like that.'

'Thoughtless and contrary to every school rule.'

'I know that.'

'But she's receiving treatment?' Davenport said doubtfully.

'Yes,' Tom's voice said smoothly. 'My wife's a doctor.

as I believe you know. She says it's little more than a heavy cold. We'll have Corby back with you right after the weekend.'

'Treatment from Dr Garrison?'

'That's correct.'

'Then could I ask you to make sure Corby has a sick-note from your wife when she returns to school?'

'Does she need that now, now that I've called?'

'Yes, Mr Garrison, I'm afraid she does. The headmaster will require that.' He coughed, signalling a change of subject. 'One other thing, Mr Garrison. It was the headmaster's decision to report the matter to the police They will have been trying to get in touch with you.'

'Was that necessary?'

'Evidently not . . .' Davenport's tone was chilly . . . 'since she's safe at home with you. But we were not in a position to know that at the time. Will you call the police, then, Mr Garrison? To let them know? The local station, here at Windsor.'

'Yes, I'll call the police.'

'And the sick-note, Mr Garrison. Most important. The headmaster stressed that.'

Tom hesitated. 'Very well, then. I'll ask my wife to write Corby a note,' he said slowly.

In the living-room Claire slammed down the phone

She ran her fingers through her blonde hair. She could hear him coming down the stairs, hear the old London staircase creaking under his weight. As the door opened she stood with her fists clenched tight.

Without looking at her, without speaking, he walked across the room and began refilling his glass from the decanter. He poured meticulously, just the amount of brandy he preferred, just the right double splash of soda.

'You bastard, Tom,' she said quietly to the bent back of the man she had been married to for six years. 'You could be putting my career in jeopardy.'

'You exaggerate,' he said.

'Trying to pass me off as a medical doctor is fraudulent use of my degree.'

'So what?' he said over his shoulder 'Nobody's going to know. Nobody's going to ask.'

'Would you play fast and loose with your own career? You sure as hell wouldn't.'

'Politics is a fishbowl,' he said casually.

'And scholarship isn't?'

'The two are not comparable, Claire. Anyway, you shouldn't have been listening,' he said, still not turning, sipping at his brandy.

'For Christ's sake, don't you care where she might be? Are you really going to call the police in Windsor and tell them she's here at home having treatment for a cold in the head?'

'Yes.'

'And what if she is in trouble this time?'

He turned round slowly and took a long pull at his drink. 'You want to see Corby punished,' he said flatly. 'You think I don't know what's going on in your head?'

'No, you don't know.'

'Claire, I can read you line for line. You can't stand it when she gets away with some teenage prank. Because it's Corby. And because she's having a good time.'

'That has nothing to do with it.'

'It has everything to do with it. You were spoilt blind by your father and when you got to school they had your measure. You're not worried about what might happen

to Corby. You're just jealous of the good time she's having.'

She was on her feet. 'I am not signing that note for Corby, Tom.'

'Then I will,' he said calmly.

She dropped back a pace in astonishment. 'You'll what? Forge my signature?'

He nodded brusquely. 'If need be, yes.'

'Forge my signature with a fake degree?' She felt panic rising in her. 'The graduation board could pull my degree for that,' she said unconvincingly.

'I doubt it.' He smiled tensely. 'But why worry? Daddy can always buy you a new one.'

She hit him. The open-handed slap across the cheek cracked like a pistol shot. Brandy leapt from his glass and splashed his chin. As she stood watching the flush reddening on his face she found herself unable to move. Her hands fell slowly to her sides. He wiped the drips from his chin. 'Okay,' he said, 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'You shouldn't have.'

He made an effort to smile wryly but anger still distorted his lips. 'You want a drink?'

She shook her head. She found she couldn't bear being in the same room. He was about to say something, maybe even something conciliatory, but she turned away, reaching down, picking up her bag. 'I'm going to the Foundation,' she said. 'I'll stay at my office tonight.'

2

'When you're a model,' Corby said to the middle-aged driver, 'you get all sorts of offers. I've had offers to go everywhere from LA to Rome and Paris. It's that sort of job.'

The Jaguar sped on down the M4 towards the Hammersmith flyover. The driver was in his early forties, club tie, striped shirt, the cuffs rolled back on the forearms. 'I can imagine,' he said, wondering how old she really was

'And some of the people you meet are fantastic,' she said. 'Givers of life, you know? With more intelligence than a dump-truck-load of university professors. None of your tight-assed middle-class respectability, trying to feel you up while they're lecturing you on how to behave. The difference is the guys I'm talking about are essentially artists. They know what they're on this planet for.'

'Don't you have a regular boyfriend?'

She laughed.

'Did I say something funny?' the driver said.

'When you're hitching, drivers always ask you that. Do you have a regular boyfriend, they say. You say no, second question is, if you don't have a regular boyfriend what do you do for regular sex?'

'Not my second question.'

She lifted her eyebrows 'So what's your second question?'

'My second question is how about a drink when we get to London?'

In her green BMW Claire drove up Old Church Street and turned onto the King's Road. She had never felt anger like this before. The raw humiliation of being locked in battle with a teenager! Was it possible that Tom didn't see that? Was it possible that he didn't see how demeaning her position was. And now he was prepared to forge her signature on a medical note!

Was it really conceivable Tom didn't see what he was doing to her? Or was it, to put it another way, just possible that he not only saw it but enjoyed it, enjoyed his wife's humiliation?

Claire mused explosively on the thought. Her stomach churned. Of course he knew. He wasn't a fool. He was, after all, the boy most likely to succeed at the London embassy. Or he was as long as he controlled his drinking.

But he knew. He saw what was happening. She felt sure of it.

A truck slowed with a hiss of air brakes and she pushed the BMW past. The blast of the truck's horn faded behind her as she thought of her husband, using his kid sister in a deliberate long-drawn-out pattern of humiliation of his own wife. And why? Because he couldn't swallow the fact that his own origins were in a tough, harsh Boston-Irish army family. And hers weren't. Or because, more simply, this last year the bright shine was maybe going off his career?

London on a squally summer night could be a depressing place. Even Chelsea's once-famous King's Road looked grim and mostly closed up. There were times she hated it. Impatiently, she followed a sedately cruising taxi down

towards World's End, overtook with barely enough room to squeeze past a number eleven bus, and accelerated to jump the lights at Beaufort Street. Every nerve was screaming.

She knew she shouldn't go to the office feeling like this. Shouldn't go to the Foundation at all tonight. Her office was equipped with an emergency cot but it still meant she risked running into some research colleague staying overnight in the hospitality suite, someone who wanted to talk labour camp records over endless cups of coffee. Okay, somewhere else.

At World's End she turned down Lots Road, ran down towards the river and braked at the Competition Club. Parking recklessly on the pavement, she switched off the engine.

She sat holding the wheel, churned by emotions too many to define. Frustration, anger, guilt – all of those and maybe more. She had hit Tom. The first person she had ever hit in her life. But then, by God, he had deserved it. He had surely deserved it. Or should she go back? And say sorry? Sorry you were going to give in to Corby yet again? Sorry you were going to forge my signature?

Anger flared in her. No. No saying sorry this time. No kiss and make up. But still the dominant image was the pistol-crack of her hand slapping Tom's face.

She wondered what Kate would make of this. Kate Kavanagh, her oldest friend, a psychiatrist, specialising in alcohology in London. In London not half a mile from here. Forget the office and stay the night with Kate? A better idea. Catch her breath and call Kate from the bar to make sure she was in? Better still.

A picture of Corby flickered in front of her eyes. A still-teenage Corby with that promise that made every man look twice at her. Claire told herself that if she was really worried

about her she should call the school herself. Tell them Corby had not come home.

And Tom would hit the roof. She reminded herself that Corby was Tom's responsibility. He was her guardian. It was up to him to sort it out. But not by forging his wife's signature, for God's sake.

Feeling better, a little better, Claire left the car and entered the small, inhospitable lobby of the club. Punching her membership number on the keyboard beside the door she waited, watching the green-tinged screen. Second letter and sixth letter of your place of birth please, the green letters asked. She counted Boston on her fingers and touched out o and n. The door buzzed and she pushed it open and entered the small bar.

An Australian girl she had never seen there before served her with a glass of white Graves. She looked around to see if she knew anybody in tonight. Unlikely, because it was Sunday. Customers, staff – everything changes for Sunday.

A young man further down the bar briefly caught her eye as her gaze swept past him. She knew he was looking at her. Not offensively. Just looking. She took her glass and moved further to the end of the bar, sipping her drink and exchanging a few words with the new Australian barmaid. After a few moments, Dave Ricks, the portly club manager, came out of his office, saw her and came across to the bar. 'Shooting tonight, Claire?' he asked her.

'Not tonight.' She gestured at the wine. She had always intended to tell Kate, since her speciality was alcohol abuse, that the effect of drink showed more quickly when shooting a handgun than any other way she knew. Would that be a useful and intriguing new fact in the new study of

alcohology? Probably not. If it was knowledge, then Kate knew it. Kate was like that.

A muffled series of explosions came from the range behind the bar. 'Jack Weedon's trying out his new 9mm Marker,' Ricks said. 'D'you want to watch?'

'Not in the mood tonight,' Claire said.

'Not in the mood to think again?'

She shook her head. 'No . . . sorry, Dave.'

'I don't get it,' he said. 'Competition shooting is what it's all about.' He had that familiar puzzled look on his face. 'You'd fit the team like a glove. And nobody believes me when I tell them we keep our best shot at home.'

'Flattery,' she said. 'My father never believed shooting was a competition sport. Some of that feeling rubbed off.'

'If it's not a sport, what is it? That's a grim point of view of your father's.'

'He learnt his shooting in a grim place.'

'He's Russian, isn't he?'

'He was a patrol commander at Stalingrad. You can imagine he gives competition shooting a bad press.'

'He taught you all the same.'

She smiled. 'In case some day you have need.' She imitated her father's heavy Russian rumble.

He left to go into the range to watch the new pistol being tried out and she ordered another glass of wine. When the glass was half empty she felt ready to call Kate.

The wall phone was next to her. Putting in a coin, she punched out Kate Kavanagh's number, readying phrases for when she answered. A bed for the night. A fight with Tom. Yes, another. But serious this time . .

The dialling tone droned on, unanswered. Kate had no regular man but a fairly active social life. She would be out

to dinner somewhere. Back late, if at all.

Claire hung up.

She tossed the twenty-pence piece slowly in the palm of her hand. She shouldn't have hit him. She'd spent years learning to control those fierce rushes of anger when she was crossed. The deep legacy of a childhood where she was given everything. She knew it, but it wasn't enough to know it. She could at least say sorry for her part in the scene. For hitting him. However bad she felt about it she was incapable of saying sorry. And she didn't feel sorry for anything she'd said about Corby.

The man along the bar had moved towards her to order another drink. A nice-looking guy, but she wasn't in the mood for flirting. She said goodnight to the Australian girl and turned for the door. In the mirror she saw him grimace his disappointment.

She got into the car and pulled out onto the King's Road. If she was going back home, it couldn't be yet.

She thought of her cot at the Foundation, of various friends she didn't want to see, and decided just to drive with some music to kill time. Then maybe in an hour, an hour or two, she would go back and they'd talk. If Tom wasn't too drunk to talk.

She took the flyover at Hammersmith. In ten minutes she was cruising the M4 towards Windsor at a steady sixty miles an hour, with Handel thundering on the stereo. She thought of Tom and the amount he drank lately. She thought of Corby and wished to hell she was already eighteen and an international model or an actress or a hooker, or whatever she planned to be. The more international the better. She thought of her flight to Russia tomorrow and the bargaining that would have to go on with dollar-hungry Russians for

the archive material of the newly discovered labour camp at Poross. Problem was the fame of the Midas Foundation was spreading through the old Soviet Union territories and ex-camp officials were getting to know how much she would pay for camp records. If it had been the prisoners who were selling, she wouldn't have minded. More often than not it was a former member of the camp staff. Paying the brutes for a record of their own brutality went against the grain

At the Windsor turn-off she thought of Corby again. Her school was no more than a mile from the castle. An unfamiliar shadow crossed her mind. Corby was too young, too confident, too attractive to be wandering around alone at night. Or even not alone.

Claire drove through Windsor until the castle loomed in front of her. Time to turn back. She glanced at the clock on the dash. By the time she got home she would have killed almost two hours. Tom would still be up. Maybe not too drunk. She would apologise for slapping him if he apologised (again) for that crack about her father. She couldn't let this stand between them for the week she was going to be in Moscow.

She turned at the castle gates, span the tyres on the cobbled forecourt and headed back towards the motorway.

It was after midnight when Claire pulled to a halt outside the house in Old Church Street. Ducking her head, she looked from the driving seat up at the windows. With an intense sense of disappointment she saw that all three storeys were dark, no light even in their bedroom on the top floor.

She was suddenly immensely tired. She got out of the car and mounted the short flight of stone steps to the yellow-painted door. In her tiredness she leaned on the door jamb

and riffled through her purse for her house keys. Finding them, she unlocked the door and felt and smelt the warm drift of air from the old house.

She was suddenly desperate to talk to someone. Not Tom. Maybe it was better to leave that till the morning. Would Kate be back? Probably not. She grimaced to herself. Half-past midnight is a bad hour to want a familiar voice. Unless of course the familiar voice lived in New York.

She went into the sitting-room, turned on a single table lamp and poured herself a small Calvados. Sipping it, she sat on the edge of the sofa, reached for the phone and punched the digits for New York. She listened to the long American ringing tones until the phone was picked up by her father's Korean houseboy.

'Kim,' she said, 'it's Claire.'

'Good evening, Miss Claire,' he said carefully. 'I will see if Midas is at home.'

On his own insistence everybody called Joseph Midasov Midas. It served to remind him, he claimed, of his talent for turning base ideas into golden profit. Claire smiled. Her father was full of . . . well, all sorts of Russian fancy.

She sipped her Calvados and waited, seeing in her mind's eye the Korean walk along the corridor and into the enormous main room of the Madison Avenue apartment, imagining her father in his leather chair, his huge head turning with that imperious, automatically irritated look that had terrified her as a child. On the line she heard his heavy Russian rumble. 'Claire, what are you doing in New York?'

'I'm not,' she said. 'I'm in London. You haven't got guests?'

'I'm reading,' he said. 'An advance copy of my book. It's brilliant.'

Joseph Midasov was never ungenerous in his own praise. When the first volume of *To Be Preserved For Ever*, his history of the Soviet labour camp system, was published in Paris in two weeks' time, he wanted all the senior members of the Foundation present. 'No problem about Paris on the 15th?' he said sharply.

'No, I shall be back from Moscow in plenty of time.'

'What's wrong, then? You don't usually call for nothing.'

'Fight with Tom,' she said. 'Corby again, of course.'

'The bitchlette.'

'She's sixteen years old, Midas.'

'She's still a little bitch,' he rumbled. 'Tell your husband it's time he came to his senses. Tell the man he is soft in the head. Put him on the line, I'll tell him.'

Suddenly she didn't want to talk to her father any longer. She wanted to talk to Tom. That was the only way to soothe the mixture of frustration and guilt she felt about the evening. 'It'll all pass,' she said. 'Good luck with the book.'

She could almost see his long body tensing in the chair. He detested the idea of luck. 'We make our own luck in life,' he said, harshly and not by any means for the first time.

'Sorry,' she said, automatically. 'See you in Paris. With any luck,' she added to irritate him.

'Wait,' he commanded before she could put the phone down. 'I have a presentiment,' he said.

Russians, she knew, not infrequently had presentiments.

'Why this fight with your husband about Corby?'

'It's not simple,' Claire said. 'Corby's taken off from school tonight . . .'

'She's run away? You don't know where she is?'

'Not at the moment. But it's not the first time.'

'Have the police been informed?' His accent was even

stronger than normal, his rumble deeper.

'I'm sure Tom's done what's necessary,' Claire said. 'I must get to bed now.'

'Wait.' His voice softened 'Call the police, kitten.'

'Now don't get melodramatic, Midas '

'You know that I'm seldom wrong.'

'I know you've been drinking.'

'Even so, such a foreboding must be taken with seriousness.'

'Corby's okay.'

'You ignore my intuition?'

'She's okay, Midas.'

'Then . . .' He paused dramatically . . . '*Requiescat in pace*,' he intoned.

'Don't say that,' she said, but a chill ran down her spine. 'You're being foolish.'

'*Requiescat in pace*,' he repeated harshly.

Again the chill. She was ready to vent her anger but he had already replaced the phone.

Finishing her drink, she stood up and turned off the light. Midas! All these years in America had done nothing to make him less Russian. In the darkness she closed her eyes. She was as tired as if she had completed a full day's work translating camp files. More than that she was disturbed. As she was often disturbed by the sheer power her father's personality held over her. Power born of surviving the years of helplessness and introspection he had suffered in Soviet Strict Regime labour camps.

She opened her eyes and shook her head. Russian forebodings were no more accurate than American forebodings. The difference, she told herself, was in the gloomy confidence with which they were delivered.

She walked into the hall. Through the long, eighteenth-century landing window the staircase was illumined by the street lamps outside. She began to climb wearily in the half-darkness. Her mind was a blank.

Approaching the top landing, she stopped, listening. Sounds from the bedroom. Movement and muffled gasps. She took a step forward, intending to call to Tom. Then stopped again.

It took slow, dawning seconds to realise exactly what the sounds were.

3

Waves of party talk in English and Russian swept through the sunlit ballroom of the old Yusupov palace on the western outskirts of Moscow at Archangelskoye. The three Russians who had backed Claire into a corner beneath a magnificent Tiepolo were describing their hopes for the size of the Midas Foundation's contribution to the Gulag Aid Fund.

'So many prisoners of the Soviets to retrain, to compensate for their wasted lives, Dr Garrison,' one of the officials was saying.

'A whole army of broken men and women,' his colleague said, 'growing old now, most of them, all needing help.'

Claire nodded her understanding. 'So many people need help,' she murmured. She was on automatic, not unsympathetic but aware that almost everything and everybody in the former Soviet Union needed Western help now. Officials, most of whom had built their career in the old Communist Party, asked for help far beyond what was realistically available.

As they talked her eyes roamed the walls of this beautiful and delicate palace of the Golitsyn and Yusupov families, and she thought of her husband in bed with another woman. Why didn't it hurt as much as it should, she wondered? Because she no longer loved him? she asked herself, nodding

automatically to the Russians. Or because she had never loved him perhaps?

Others joined their group. To Claire's relief a German banker became more the focus of attention. The diversion gave her time to look at the other guests. Her glance moved across the room. She was sipping a glass of Georgian champagne when she first became aware of him, standing at the edge of a large knot of people below the minstrel gallery. She saw his head lift, catch the sunlight and look towards her.

She moved without really thinking. Excusing herself, she left the German banker to the ring of Russian officials. Moments later, by what seemed some coincident impulse, they were moving towards each other, detaching themselves from one group to join briefly with another, talking, greeting, glancing, moving on until they stood side by side in the same untidy circle of guests. 'We made it,' she said.

He laughed at her candour. 'You speak good Russian. I heard a few snatches of it on my way over.'

'A Russian father,' she said.

'A Russian mother.' He inclined his head. 'Steven Ross. Amnesty International, New York Office. I raise funds – and attend parties. If I've learnt one thing about the new Russia it's that parties are where business is done. This is my third today.' He held out his hand.

'Claire Garrison,' she said, shaking hands. 'Midas Foundation.'

'The rumour is you're setting up in Moscow.'

'It won't get my vote,' she said. 'The truth is that right now Moscow is not my favourite city.' She grimaced. 'I'm not too serious. But take a deep breath in Moscow today and somebody wants to charge you a fistful of dollars. Since I

arrived this afternoon I've been offered a set of fake labour camp records at more than my budget for the whole year, had three hundred dollars stolen from my hotel room, and allowed myself to be booked for the ballet tonight when I'd much sooner be having dinner with you. If that's not coming on too fast and low,' she added with a smile.

He shook his head. 'If you can't duck the ballet, I'm here tomorrow. What do you say?'

She laughed. 'I say yes. How long are you staying in Moscow?'

'Just tying up a few loose ends. I've been trying to trace the poet Abramov – disappeared in the early seventies. The old Soviet government refused to confirm or deny imprisonment. Since then there's been no sign of him.'

'You found him?'

'I traced him to a small camp in the Moscow *oblast* – Brinsk. Its speciality was intellectuals.'

She was interested. 'I've never heard of Brinsk. Tell me.'

'Abramov died in the early eighties. I've seen camp papers recording his death and a certificate. Sadly we can cross him off our list.'

'Camp papers?'

He smiled. 'Midas Foundation – that must be your field. Would you like to meet my contact?'

'Would I!'

Russians carrying vodka glasses were bearing down on her. Hurriedly he scrawled his name across a hotel card and gave it to her. 'Tomorrow,' he said. 'Call me as soon as you're free.'

Early the following afternoon they were driving north out of the city on the Zagorsk road. For Claire it was difficult to

suppress the bubble of excitement inside her. Everybody in the Foundation had heard rumours of a small, select camp for intellectuals in the Moscow area but old KGB records showed nothing. Police and Interior authorities had continued to deny knowledge of such a camp long after the Soviet Union had expired. Most people in the Foundation, including Midas himself, were inclined to believe that no such camp ever existed. To pinpoint it, to acquire perhaps some record material, would be a triumph that she could lay proudly at her father's feet.

They drove off the road a few miles from Zagorsk and along pot-holed tracks through thick birch woods.

'I was passed hand to hand through about five contacts before I met Semyon,' Steven Ross said. 'I still don't have a full name for him, but I think the record books he has are genuine. You're the expert; you might take one look and say it's all junk.'

'I doubt it,' Claire said. 'This whole story has the sniff of real. What's this up ahead.'

They were approaching a complex of brick buildings improbably built in the forest, although when Claire looked more carefully she realised that none of the trees surrounding the buildings were much more than shrubs.

'This was once the administrative centre of one of the biggest collective farms in the Zagorsk area. There's no longer any farm, but there's still an administration. Our man has some obscure but apparently well-endowed post.'

They walked through the drab corridors to an office that had been set aside for the meeting. Minutes later they were sitting across the desk from a man in his late fifties, his eyes small in a large, high-cheeked face, his black hair falling in a greasy cowlick onto his forehead. 'And why would a

beautiful lady like you be interested in any documents I might have?'

'I'm a graduate student at the University of Indiana,' Claire said. 'The fate of intellectuals under Brezhnev is my doctoral thesis.'

'A student?' His smile had slipped.

'A student,' Claire said.

'Not much money,' Semyon said. 'You're telling me not much money.'

'Let's get down to cases,' Steven Ross said. 'These documents are no longer any good to you. Who knows, they may even become dangerous. There's some money on the table; pick it up and run.'

'How much?'

Claire leaned forward. 'Mr Ross was jumping the gun,' she said. 'There's no money on the table until I know the provenance of anything you might have.'

'You're a tough negotiator,' Steven Ross said in English.

The Russian was not happy. 'The papers speak for themselves,' he said.

'Show me.'

He shook his head.

Claire made to stand. 'Either you tell me how you came by them or you let me take a look. I'm not making an offer, any offer, into thin air.'

'Sit down, madame. Please.' The Russian sat behind his desk, his lips pursed.

Claire sat down. She could see that Steven Ross was fighting a smile.

'This is not my office,' Semyon said.

'I guessed it wasn't.'

'I was deputy manager, cereals, on the farm here.'

Claire nodded.

'Ministry of Agriculture. Never police, MGB, Interior Ministry . . .'

'Okay.'

'But you laid hands on some papers,' Ross said.

'My brother. He was special detachment.'

Claire nodded. This began to sound good.

'Brinsk Camp was very small. My brother was records officer.'

'Ah . . .' She smiled. Then allowed her face to set. 'But there's no KGB record of such a camp. Nothing in the files of the Moscow Procurator's Office, Defence or Interior Ministries.'

The Russian looked infinitely sly. 'This is why papers are worth money,' he said.

'Why?'

'Brinsk was not run by the usual authorities.'

'Who did run it?' Steven Ross asked.

'Writers Union,' Semyon said triumphantly. 'Surprise you, huh? A special camp for writers who did not behave themselves, published in samizdat, whatever . . Special KGB detachment responsible for guards. No records except the ones I have. How much you pay for the Death Book?'

'Two thousand dollars,' Claire said casually.

'Twenty-five thousand dollars or I leave now.'

'It's a good story, Semyon,' Claire said, 'but there were a lot of camps. You brothers and cousins with papers in your back pockets have got to learn that. I don't have the sort of money you're asking.'

'Ten thousand dollars,' he said.

'I'm researching a doctorate, Semyon. I'm not the

purchasing agent from an American library. Five thousand dollars is my final offer. And I'll have to borrow from Mr Ross here to raise it.'

The Russian looked at her thoughtfully. 'Seven thousand five hundred,' he said without conviction.

She shook her head. 'You've had my last offer. Do we have a deal?'

The small eyes glittered.

Two hours later, the records safely in her hotel safe, Claire was driving with Steven Ross through the drizzled neon glare of the Arbat. When she phoned Midas tomorrow to tell him the news, she thought she knew how he would react. Surly disappointment that it was not him who had put her on the trail; and grudging pleasure which would grow in the next weeks to embarrassing pride. She was looking forward to making the call.

She was rerunning the phone call in her head when she noticed that Steven Ross had swung the hired Moskva off the road and stopped in a side street. She waited while he switched off the engine and turned towards her.

'Did you know, Claire,' he said, his blue eyes caught in a shaft of streetlight, 'that by 1960, forty per cent of all American marriages were proposed in an automobile?'

'Front seat,' she said, 'or back?'

'Exact location unrecorded. But what do you make of that figure?'

'Nothing, unless this is some kind of crazy proposal. In which case I have to remind you I'm already married.'

'Your love affair with Moscow's over, you said. A chambermaid stole your three hundred dollars.'

'I mean really married. To a flesh and blood husband.'

'Separated, you hinted this afternoon. Even so, I have to say it.'

'Say what?'

'What I have to say,' he said carefully, 'is that I'm not going to find it easy to think of you as a married woman.'

The sweep of the wipers revealed the rain-glittering city. 'Okay,' she said uncertainly. 'I think that's okay. To warn me, I mean.'

He smiled, lightening the moment. 'After all, you just walked out on your husband, didn't you?'

'I guess that's what I did.' She was silent, embarrassed. 'Listen,' she said after a moment, 'you get the rest of the story over dinner. That's the deal.'

He had not, she discovered, chosen one of Moscow's tourist hotels. The cellar they entered down cracked steps threw up images of another time, another city, of the years after World War II, of East Berlin perhaps before the Wall came down, of Harry Lime's Vienna.

It was a narrow room painted in dark green. One long wall was hung with bright pictures from which triangular sections of canvas had been carefully cut. A crudely printed poster announced the first showing of the works of a young Russian painter. Along the opposite wall twenty or more wooden cubicles were set, each table supplied with its own candle spiked in a pewter dish. Duke Ellington played a hushed 'Mood Indigo'; waitresses in black dresses moved through the half-lights as pale-faced, shapeless shadows.

'I like it,' she said. 'I didn't know such places existed in Moscow.'

'The wonders of capitalism,' he said. 'It's a changing city. Soon you'll be able to find someone to take your order and

smile.' He was slewing in his seat, trying to attract the attention of a waitress. She laughed as he gave up conventional methods and walked over and dropped a packet of Lucky Strike into her money purse.

It worked. When the girl came over they ordered sausage and sauerkraut and a half-litre of vodka. He was leaning forward, his face in full candlelight. For a moment she studied him. He held her glance and smiled at her.

'I suppose,' she said, 'you don't have a curious idea that we've met somewhere before?'

'Do you?'

'Yes, I do,' she said. 'It's quite strong.'

He sat back in his seat, studying her face. 'I don't honestly see that slipping my memory.'

'No, nor mine, to be frank. But I don't mean recently.' She frowned. 'This is something much hazier than a memory. Something from a long time ago maybe.'

'Spoken like a true Russian,' he said.

She was still frowning. 'Which part of the States did you grow up in?'

'New York City. You know Brighton Beach?'

'The Russian immigrant district? My father took me there once or twice. I think he only did it to irritate my very English mother. When she died, the visits stopped.'

'Did your Russian father make out in the land of opportunity?'

'You could say that.'

'My mother didn't.'

There was something in his tone that made her raise her eyes to his. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'What happened?'

He paused. 'It's the luck of the draw,' he said casually. 'New York was too much for her. Up and down the board-

walk at Brighton Beach everybody said she was crazy. When I was about twelve or thirteen she was committed.'

'And you?'

'Orphanage, foster parents, orphanage. Good times and bad.'

'What happened to your mother?'

He shrugged. 'Maybe she's dead. Maybe she lives like a countess. Maybe she's a bag lady at Brighton Beach. I don't know.'

'It's a sad story,' she said.

'It's a sad story.' He paused. 'But your father made out in the land of opportunity?'

She nodded, uncomfortable. Guilty maybe. As she believed her father felt at times. Guilty about his sheer good luck. Although he wouldn't allow it to be called that. She swallowed, knowing she had to get it over with. 'He was one of the lucky ones. He escaped from a Soviet labour camp and made his way to America.' She pushed on. 'Before I married Tom my name was Midasov,' she said.

His eyes widened. 'Your father really did make out. Joseph Midasov. Of the Midas Foundation. For which you work.'

'It's not nepotism,' she said defensively. 'I'm a historian. Properly qualified.'

'Dr Claire Garrison.'

She nodded, mollified. 'I know some people think of the Foundation as maybe too commercial.'

'I didn't say that.'

'We do good work,' she said. 'Lots of interested parties are out there making a bonfire of the Soviet past. Without us half the history of the labour camps would have been destroyed by now. We've traced and preserved records that would have gone forever but for the Foundation. Someday

the people who ran the camps during the Stalin era and after are going to be brought to trial. Should be brought to trial. They are guilty men.'

'And the Foundation's records will help convict them.'

'They'll do more than help. In many cases they are the only documentation that now exists. Thirty, forty years later we can't rely on witnesses. The fiasco of Ivan the Terrible's trial in Israel showed that once and for all. You need documents, old ID cards, fingerprints.'

'And you have them?'

'We're getting them. In massive quantities. We're the only people who are. The only people who care.'

'You're proud of him. Of your father.'

She nodded slowly. 'Intensely proud,' she said. She grinned. 'You spotted it, huh?'

He looked down, fiddling with the melting candle wax on the base of the pewter holder while the vodka carafe and two glasses were placed on the table. 'What I'd really like is to hear what happened,' he said. 'Why you left your husband. If that's what you just did.'

She hesitated. 'I'm not sure I'm too comfortable talking about it yet.'

He filled the two glasses and pushed one across the rough scrubbed table-top.

She took a deep breath. 'Okay,' she said. 'Why not? I walked in on him. He was in bed with a woman.'

He grimaced.

'Sunday night. Night before I was due to leave on this trip.' She paused, took the glass of vodka that he had pushed across the table and lifted it halfway towards her mouth.

'A bad shock.'

She nodded. 'Worse thing about it is I can't work out

what I'm feeling now, apart from pretty raw.'

She sipped her vodka. She was wondering how much to confide to him. How much did one confide to attractive strangers in these circumstances? Usually quite a lot, she guessed. 'The truth is,' she said, 'we haven't been getting on too well for the last couple of years. I suppose that always is the truth, huh?'

'I guess it depends why.'

'In our case, the strain of having Tom's kid sister living with us. Bright, sassy, sixteen years old and a diamond-edged bitch.' She stopped. 'Wow! I've said it to someone at last.' She lifted her glass, tipped it back and drained it. 'I feel better.'

'Why doesn't she live with her parents?'

'Family problems. Mother's dead anyway.' How much do you say to strangers? She hesitated for a moment. 'There were accusations against Corby's father,' she said quickly. 'I feel bad talking like this. Talking to a stranger.'

'You feel bad about too many things. I'm not a stranger. Or if I'm still a stranger I don't plan to remain one.'

A silence fell between them. Again he didn't press her with questions. In the unhurried silence she began to feel easier. She pushed her empty vodka glass towards him. 'Tom couldn't allow Corby to stay,' she said.

'And she's been with you ever since.'

She waited while he poured more vodka for her.

'Wasn't the ideal set-up.'

She shook her head so that her hair flared dangerously close to the candle flame. 'It makes for a strained marriage . . .'

'Who started roaming first?'

She smiled. 'You're quick. I was first to roam. Sort of.

Got my fingers burnt before anything really came of it.'

'Now it's his turn?'

'That's not the way I see it.'

'I guess not. How far did he roam?'

'Not very far.'

'His pouting young secretary?'

'His secretary is owlishly bespectacled as secretaries ought to be. No, his boss.'

'His boss?'

'Who happens to be a tall, over-endowed Texan lady. Over-endowed in every way. Looks, money and sheer brain-power. She makes the world spin her way. She's a very senior official at the US embassy in London. Most times she holds her forty-five years comfortably at bay with the help of a Cuban toyboy she keeps two blocks from the office. The night I came home unexpectedly it was with my husband.'

He sat, watching her, not speaking. She found she liked that. No grimaced understanding, no murmuring sympathy.

'I make it all sound larger than life,' she said, 'because it's easier to talk about it that way I suppose.'

'How else do we talk about the things that really hurt?'

'You do that too?'

'I try not to.' His eyes seemed to be sizing her up. He popped his lip as if he had made a decision. 'I grew up in bad neighbourhoods,' he said. 'No excuse for the things I did. Plenty of people grew up in bad places and stayed within the law.'

She looked at him in astonishment. 'But you didn't.'

'No,' he said, 'I didn't. I got into trouble. Kids' stuff at first. Fights in bars. I swung around with the wrong friends.'

She waited, as he had when she was talking, keeping her eyes on his face, waiting calmly.

'Soon,' he said, drawing breath, 'I was robbing nice middle-class people of their trinkets and treasures. Three, four months and I was confident I'd never be caught. I was caught. And sent to the House of Correction.' He looked up and smiled. 'I don't tell everybody.'

'No.'

'But you're not a stranger.'

She found she was too moved to say anything. She looked down at her vodka. It was as if her life, which had been trundling along in a vague, unsatisfactory manner, had suddenly kicked into high gear. She lifted her glass, wondering if she could smile without a welling-up of tears. 'To the House of Correction,' she said.

He paid the bill and they left the restaurant laughing about the ridiculous cut-out paintings on the wall. Outside it had stopped raining, but water still dripped from old guttering. A line of arched niches in an old convent wall contained broken statuary. As they walked to the end of the narrow alley where they had left the car, their footsteps rang on the paving stones.

'You don't think it's possible that our paths crossed when we were very young?' she said into the damp summer air. 'One of those times Midas took me to Brighton Beach maybe?'

'I like the idea,' he said. 'I'm not going to say it's impossible.'

'But you think it's not very likely?'

He smiled. 'Do you?'

'Maybe you're right.' She looked at him. 'Okay. I'm happy with the story as it is.'

They walked on in silence, matching step for step. She was not unaware of the risk she was taking. Not unaware of

the danger in meeting an attractive, available man before she had decided whether her separation from Tom was permanent. An alternative like Steven Ross, even if he turned out to be no more than a temporary alternative, was likely to harden her heart towards Tom Make her less willing to give her marriage another chance.

'A whole trolley-load of roubles for your thoughts,' he said.

She shook her head. 'Not these thoughts. At least not yet.'

Letting herself into her hotel room, thinking of Steven Ross, thinking of Tom, her husband, Claire glanced automatically at the bare bedside table. It was the first time since she was married that she had travelled anywhere alone without setting up a picture of Tom beside the bed. A piece of schoolgirlish voodoo. To keep him safe or her safe while they were apart. Even after the bloom had faded, even after their marriage had become more of an arrangement than a bonding, she had placed the picture there whenever she was on her travels.

From the mantelshelf she took the card Steven Ross had given her last night. Hotel Rossiya. And across the bottom, his name in a firm, almost italic hand. But it was the phone number she was looking at. The phone number of his hotel not five minutes' walk from where she stood.

And yet . . . But for that moment last Sunday night, Thomas James Garrison would have been looking up at her from his silver frame on that chipped glass bedside table – clear eyes, firm chin, honest-to-goodness mouth . . She stopped.

Throwing clothes onto a chair as she crossed the room, she went into the bathroom and turned on the shower Perhaps Tom Garrison had never been honest to goodness, she said

to herself as she finished undressing. She stood naked in front of the hissing shower. Perhaps the truth was he had been sleeping with Joyce Hartmann since the day he and Claire came back from their honeymoon.

She stepped under the weak jet. But why would Joyce Hartmann want Tom on anything but a change-of-scene basis? She had Carlos, her improbably beautiful Cuban twenty-two-year-old, on tap. Claire shook her head. Just as likely that what she had barged in on Sunday night was a one-off, never to be repeated . . . A predatory heron's dip on Joyce Hartmann's part.

So it meant nothing. Did that mean she should just ignore it? Push it behind her? Focus on some of those things about her life that she usually spent time carefully avoiding? Like asking why she had married Tom in the first place. And facing the answer that perhaps it was less for himself than for what he might become. Face the fact that it was, maybe for both of them, a marriage of ambition. She tensed. She pushed her thoughts forward, into areas she hated inhabiting. A marriage of ambition. But whose ambition, her own or her father's?

Turning to face the jet, she let the water dance across her mouth. Then breathed in angrily, with anger turned against herself. Every girl she knew, certainly Kate Kavanagh, would have been happy to marry Tom half a dozen years ago. He had been an obvious State Department high flyer. Wealth she had already, or at least the promise of it. But with Tom almost everything else in American life had beckoned.

Some of it still did. Perhaps just a little less certainly since his drinking had started to increase. But there were still glittering prizes if she were prepared to continue the marriage. She had married Tom for those prizes, hadn't she? Or . . . again she let the thought, like the tepid shower water, dribble

over her . . . or because Midas had pointed her at those prizes?

So, what, stay with Tom? Keep the eyes firmly locked on the glittering prizes? And let Steven Ross remain a warm memory of what might have been. Like other warm memories from the past . . .

She soaped herself down.

Or, hell, she could call up Steven at his hotel the other side of Red Square. If Tom had lapsed once and screwed his boss, why for God's sake shouldn't she? Screw Steven Ross.

Tonight.

She leaned her back against the tiled wall of the shower. Steven Ross was booked on an early flight tomorrow morning. Her own flight was a few hours later. When they parted in the lobby downstairs he had promised to meet her at London Airport. She stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself. Would he remember he had promised?

He would if she called him now and asked him to come over for a nightcap.

She sat down next to the phone, wondering if she felt decided enough, adulterous enough, to make the call.

4

Under the unwavering, dark North African eye of his old secretary, Calixte Sorel, Joseph Midasov paced the sunlit pathways of his favourite Paris gardens, the Parc Monceau.

From a distance of a hundred yards, his tall, slender, broad-shouldered frame seemed to carry his eighty years without effort. Even his slight limp was concealed to Calixte by his own fading eyesight.

Two old men, master and servant, growing old together, was the thought that ran through Calixte's mind. He wanted to spit his distaste onto the grass in front of him but a French family had just passed under the Rotunda gateway and Calixte swallowed hard instead.

Master and servant. With Midas there could be no other relationship. Even his daughter Claire, Calixte reflected, independent, American Claire, was bound to him by bonds of subservience. Why else would she accept this peremptory summons back from Moscow? She worked for the Midas Foundation, that of course was true. But Calixte had heard Midas on the phone to her in Moscow. They were speaking in Russian, so he was unable to understand anything but the tone. And the tone, Midas's tone, was clear. The tone not of angry father to adult daughter, not even employer to employee. The tone was master to servant.

The truth was, Calixte said to himself not for the first

time, the truth was that Joseph Midasov was a monster. One day, Claire would have to face that fact, that he was a monster of egoism, a monster of pride, a monster of wilfulness and spite. She would have to face the fact. And that some day she would have to cut free.

As Calixte stood watching, Midas stopped in the middle of the path and stood still, the sun catching his thin grey hair. Calixte, almost as old as his master, walked slowly towards him. Midas had signalled that his promenade was at an end. Years of watching the man enabled Calixte to interpret his wishes. Now he wanted a cigarette, a rough Russian Belomors, and they would walk back to the car together while Midas smoked in silence.

As Claire stood in the elevator taking her up to her father's suite in the Crillon, she felt her tension transferring to a slight trembling in her arms. The lift attendant was facing away from her, so she raised a hand to see if that too was shaking, but the extended fingers seemed steady. That was good. Her father pounced on weakness; she had seen it often.

She left the lift and was conducted to the door of the suite. She took a deep breath. First, of course, she was wearing jeans and a shirt, her usual travelling clothes. He wouldn't like that.

Calixte let her in with his warm, slow smile of greeting. She grasped his arm and kissed his cheek as she had done when she was a child. Then he led her into the sitting-room and disappeared as only he could, like some Arab genie, in a puff of smoke almost.

Her father was sitting in a straight-back armchair on the far side of the room. He waited a moment until she stood in front of him, then got slowly to his feet, exaggerating the

effort required. When he finally spoke, many seconds had elapsed. 'Claire, darling,' he said. He reached out and put his thin hands on her shoulders. 'Travelling like a hippie . . .' He was smiling but it was a thin smile. 'What do the airline attendants think of you in first class?'

'I don't travel first class,' she said. 'I conserve the Foundation's money for other things.'

He kissed her cheek and let his hands drop from her shoulders. 'Let's get the unpleasantness out of the way first,' he said.

She stiffened.

'Sit down, Claire, I'm not going to bite your head off.'

'You already did. On the phone.'

He looked pained. 'You bought documents wholly outside your brief, Claire.'

'It was an opportunity. Good God, I'm supposed to be Director of Acquisitions for the Foundation. Are you saying they're not genuine?'

'I haven't really examined them yet, but I've no reason to think there's anything wrong with these particular records.'

She shook her head. 'I don't understand you, Midas. What is your objection?'

His face changed, hardened. 'The established process is discussion and agreement between us *before* an acquisition of documents is made. I want you to keep to that in future. I will not tolerate action, even by my daughter, that excludes me from the decision-making process. Is that clear?'

'I could resign,' she said.

He smiled, warmly now. 'Resign? From a job you love, a job you do better than anyone I can imagine in your place? Please, kitten, I beg you. No talk of resigning, no cold, unyielding looks. We've had a little tussle. Not our

first. Now let's just put it aside. I'm going to the health centre this afternoon for three days. There they'll pummel me, irrigate me, detoxify me and turn me out fit to enjoy a holiday with you at the end of the week. I'm sorry, kitten.'

'Sorry . . . ?' She was still bubbling with anger.

'To have asked you to break your journey from Moscow. I should have left this whole business over until we met at the end of the week. But I didn't want it to spoil our holiday together on the island. Am I forgiven?'

'No,' she said, 'you know damn well you're not.'

He burst into a laugh that ended in a rumble in his throat. 'Let's kiss and make up,' he said.

'Go and get yourself irrigated. Got some of that Russian bile washed out of your system.'

He put his arm round her shoulder and walked her across to the window. 'Have dinner with me tonight.'

'I'm due back in London,' she said. 'This afternoon. The only flight I could get at that notice was Air France first class.'

He nodded gravely. 'You're so beautiful,' he said, 'the steward won't even notice you're wearing jeans.'

Leaving Midas, her face still flushed with anger, flushed with the knowledge that, apart from a few face-saving volleys, it was anger essentially unexpressed, Claire came down in the elevator. Crossing the lobby of the hotel, she stopped. An assistant concierge came towards her. 'Can I help you, madame . . . ?'

Claire shook her head. 'No thank you.' But she remained standing in the middle of the lobby. Should she make a phone call? Or just take a cab straight to the airport and a flight to

London? She walked slowly towards the door. If her eye caught a telephone . . .

There was a bank of phones near the door. She shrugged as if fate had intervened and crossed to pick one up. She was surprised she remembered the number after all this time.

'Adam,' she said, as her brother-in-law picked up the phone. 'It's Claire.'

There was a long silence at the other end.

'I'm in Paris,' she said, 'and this isn't a repeat performance of last time. I thought maybe a drink.' She laughed uncomfortably. 'But of course that's what I said last time.'

'I have a lunch date,' he said carefully. 'How about this evening?'

She thought a moment. 'No,' she said. 'I'm back in London this afternoon.'

'I can't switch lunch,' he said. 'But there's time for a drink beforehand. Can you get to Le Racing?'

'Will they let me in wearing jeans?'

'Of course.'

'In twenty minutes, then?'

She put down the phone, angry with herself. She knew she should never have made the call. Some things should be allowed to die naturally. Feelings, for instance.

She found her own cab and asked for the Racing Club de France, sat back in her seat and let central Paris stream by. It was September and most of the vacationers were back in town. The taxi dived and swerved round the Etoile and took the broad Avenue Foch through Haussmann's Paris of great buildings and high, forbidding green *portes cochères*.

At the gate of the club they were stopped and she told the attendant she was meeting Monsieur Adam Garrison.

'He's just arrived. He's waiting for you on the terrace, Madame.'

She should have felt excitement but anger was predominant. Anger for having made the call in the first place. She could see him now, in profile, at a table in the sun. An obviously tall man, even sitting. A tall man like Tom. For a moment she thought to turn away. Go back to the lobby and call him to say she just discovered her plane left earlier than she had thought. Climb back in her taxi and ride straight to Charles de Gaulle.

But he had seen her. He stood as she followed the waiter out onto the terrace.

'Claire . . . good to see you.' His tone was measured, not cool, but the tone he might have used to greet an important international client. The words, too. 'Sit down and I'll get us a drink.'

She sat opposite him. Around them, casually well-dressed men and women sat at tables and watched the tennis on the pink clay courts. It was a long time since she had suffered a sense of being out of place, but in her travelling jeans and trainers that's how she felt now as she ordered a *citron pressé*. Out of place or simply in the wrong place.

'I'm sorry, Adam,' she said, 'I think perhaps I shouldn't have come.'

He didn't try to contradict her. For a moment he sat looking at her, silent.

'Say something,' she said.

He shrugged. She could see the tension around the eyes. 'Why did you call?' he asked her.

She sighed, smiling. 'I was in Paris seeing Dad – Midas. He just gave me a bawling out. Things are lousy in London too. I didn't think. I just called.'

He smiled reluctantly, hunched forward in his grey lawyer's suit, but still young-faced, not as conventionally good-looking as Tom, but a face with more character.

'You want to tell me how things are in London?' he said. 'Okay.'

'You're not bursting for news.'

He smiled again. 'Tell me how things are.'

'Tom's drinking. A lot.'

'So that it affects his job?'

'So that it affects me.'

He winced.

'I don't mean that,' she said. 'I mean in general it affects me.'

'He gets mean?'

'Short-tempered, everything's on a short fuse.'

'How about work?'

'He drinks there too. It's beginning to be noticed.'

Adam raised his eyebrows.

She was silent. 'Wanna know about yo' kid sister, too?'

'Not really.'

'Last weekend she bunked off school.'

He shrugged. 'Again?'

'Okay, you're saying, so tell me what's new.' Claire paused. 'What's new is that Tom's having an affair. At least, that's what I think's new.'

His head came up. 'Are you sure?'

'It could just be a one-night stand. You've heard of his boss. The Hartmann lady.'

He nodded. He sat without talking, watching her. The waiter brought their drinks. 'What are you going to do?'

'I don't know,' she said bitterly. 'Have an affair of my own, I guess.'

He could see the bitterness was directed at him, not at Tom.

Behind his head a waiter was talking to a pretty girl in a flowered silk dress. Claire saw the waiter indicate their end of the terrace. The girl nodded and began to make her way through the tables.

'I have a feeling your lunch date's arriving.'

He turned and waved. 'Yuh,' he said, turning back. 'She's early. You don't have to go.'

'Wrong, Adam. I do.' Claire stood. 'Apart from anything else I've a plane to catch.'

He had come round the table and was standing next to her. 'For Christ's sake,' he said. 'You did the right thing, Claire. Call me when you're next in Paris.'

The girl in the flowered dress reached the table. 'Françoise . . .' Adam drew her forward. 'This is Claire . . .'

'I was just leaving.' Claire shook hands quickly with the French girl.

'I want to hear more about Tom,' Adam said.

'I've just discovered . . .' She was moving away . . . 'there's no more to tell.'

She walked quickly across the terrace, out through the restaurant and down the steps to where her taxi was waiting. 'The airport,' she said. 'Charles de Gaulle.' It was what she should have told the driver when she first caught the cab outside the Crillon.

She was fuming. With anger edged with humiliation. Anger at Midas or at Adam? She wasn't sure.

At the airport she checked flight times to London. The next Air France flight to London would arrive at Heathrow just a few minutes after the British Airways flight from Moscow that Steven Ross thought she was catching. Would

he be there, she wondered? She walked quickly into the first-class cloakroom. In the changing room she kicked off her trainers and stepped out of her jeans. She put on a pale business suit with a skirt to the knee and tan heels. Brushing her hair out of the knot she had wound it into, she added a little careful make-up. She looked at herself in the mirror and felt a whole lot better.

5

The British Airways flight from Moscow had landed and cleared Customs. Steven Ross frowned. There was no sign of her. He went to the information desk and checked when the next Moscow flight was due. Two hours. He was about to go and find himself some coffee when an Air France flight from Paris began to come through. Among a group of French schoolchildren he saw Claire.

For a moment he watched her, smiling to himself at her preoccupied air as she strode through airside Arrivals, her tan topcoat flowing behind her, leather shoulder-bag riding her hip, a dark green alligator briefcase in her right hand.

Moving forward, he blocked her way. 'Can I offer the lady a lift somewhere?'

She stopped abruptly. 'You could,' she said slowly 'If you were so inclined.'

He leaned forward and took her shoulder-bag. 'I'm so inclined,' he told her. 'You forgot I said I'd be here to pick you up.'

'I didn't forget. But I had a summons to stop off in Paris. I thought you'd be gone.'

'On the contrary.' He gestured. 'Your Hertz carriage awaits you.'

From rows of airport bucket seats people looked up as they passed. Men's eyes on Claire; women's glances

following her companion. An attractive couple: Steven Ross tall, his features an assemblage of straight planes – nose, mouth, jawline; his colouring the blue eyes and pale hair of the Baltic lands of northern Europe. Next to him Claire signalled the English part of her origins, her hair a deeper blonde, her eyes clear hazel, a complexion creamed by a softer climate.

Through the walkway to the number two car park they talked of Moscow. It was not until they were in the Hertz Rover travelling towards London that she decided to tell him. 'You know,' she said, sitting back in her seat, 'when I got back to my hotel that evening, I nearly picked up the phone and asked you to come over.'

He glanced at her, surprised, then pleased. 'Hell, why didn't you?'

'Cold feet. I told myself I still had decisions to make. They can't be made all tangled up in the sheets with someone else.'

'These decisions,' he said slowly, 'I'd like to know when you make them.'

She turned in her seat. 'How long are you going to be in London?'

'I've a couple of calls to make. After that I'm free. To stay a few days or fly back home.' He paused. 'It depends on you.'

From the King's Road they turned right to run down Old Church Street. Claire pointed to the three-floor, flat-fronted Georgian house tucked into a corner. 'There's driveway parking for two cars,' she said, 'but as usual the entrance is blocked.'

The Rover came to a halt behind an Alfa Romeo. In the

driveways the cars were Mercedes and Jaguars and BMWs. They got out of the car, picking up Claire's bags from the back seat.

'We're being observed,' she said, without turning her head. 'My next-door neighbour keeping an unneighbourly eye on me.'

He turned quickly and caught a quick glimpse of a frowning face looking down at him before the curtain fell back into position.

As they carried the bags down the short paved drive, he looked up at the house, the long sash windows, the wisteria twisting its way across the surface of the old brick.

She glanced at him. 'You're thinking, is it bankrolled by her father?'

'You caught me out.'

'The answer's yes. When my father heard Tom and I were coming to London he got straight on to a Bond Street real estate company to choose us a desirable little residence. He is, I'm afraid, a man of much action and little tact. Tom was furious, naturally enough. At least, he made all the signs of being furious.'

'And you?'

'Not furious enough to turn down three-quarters of a million dollars, I guess. I grew up rich. It's difficult to step down.'

Putting down her briefcase, Claire began inserting keys. She frowned. 'Either he forgot the deadlock or he's at home.'

'You want me to go?'

She felt it as one of those moments. Say yes and he'd be about his business travelling the world. Say no and God knows what might happen if Tom were in the house. Another watershed.

'No,' she said. 'You want to?'

He barely hesitated 'I'll stay,' he said.

'Okay.' She smiled, but her face immediately reverted to a tense look. She swung open the door, giving him one more glance, but if his blue eyes were readable they were not alarmed at the prospect of the next few minutes. Even if Tom were waiting for her inside. 'It could just as easily be Corby,' Claire said lightly. 'Fired from her third school since we came to England.'

They went into the hall and put down her bags. She closed the front door and he waited for her to lead the way 'Go ahead,' she said He went forward through the open door. Two rooms had been knocked together giving a long well-lit space with two marble fireplaces in the wall opposite the windows. Dark mahogany furniture gleamed against smoky pink Japanese silk wall covering.

Claire stood at the bottom of the stairs and called Tom. She called again but there was no answer. When she joined him in the living-room she was smiling. 'Relax,' she said. 'Let's have a drink.'

He was looking at a portrait of a man with long grey locks and a seventeenth-century breastplate. The background was a grim stone mansion. 'General George Pemberton,' he read aloud from the bottom of the portrait, '*anno domini* 1657. An ancestor?'

'My mother was born a Pemberton,' she said.

'English?' he asked.

She nodded 'The villain in the portrait began his career by stomping Ireland for Oliver Cromwell. Tom says there were Garrisons among the massacred at Drogheda. He likes to hold General Pemberton – and me – responsible.'

'A joke?'

'Mostly. Except that at times of stress it amuses Tom to pretend he thinks of me as more English than American.'

'And the house in the background?'

'It's in Wiltshire. After the Irish massacre, the villain's next career move was to serve as one of the generals who restored Charles II. First a pension from Cromwell, then a grant of land from a grateful new monarch. It's called playing both ends against the middle. But he built a fine house.'

'Not still in your family?'

'My mother left it to me. It's far too big and I don't have the sort of money needed to maintain it.' She smiled wryly. 'And before you ask, Midas wouldn't offer a penny towards maintaining anything that bound me to my mother's side of the family.' She shrugged. 'The truth is he's impossibly jealous of the Pembertons. So, I suppose, is Tom.'

They both heard the sound upstairs. A thud. Something knocked over. Then another thud. Claire walked into the hall, fury overtaking her at the thought that Joyce Hartmann was with him. 'Jesus,' she said. 'If he's brought that woman into my house again . . .'

'He won't have done that,' Steven Ross said. 'He knew you were coming back this afternoon.' He came into the doorway as she stood in the hall.

Tom Garrison was coming down the stairs, unshaven, unsteady. He wore a business suit but no tie. 'I need to talk to you, Claire,' he said, walking past them into the living-room.

The anger rose in her. 'This is Steven Ross,' she said. 'We met in Moscow.'

'Please ask Mr Ross to leave,' Tom Garrison said. His wide-armed gesture towards the door showed how drunk he was, but his speech was clear.

'What would you like me to do, Claire?' Ross turned away from him.

She stood undecided for a moment, then exhaled sharply, in exasperation. 'I'm sorry, Steven. Will you call me later?'

'Sure. Say in a couple of hours?'

'That would be good,' she said.

He gave her a brief smile and walked into the hall without a glance at the other man. 'Okay?' he said.

She nodded and let him out. 'Call me. This I'm going to have to sort out alone.'

She closed the front door and walked back into the room. 'Let's get this straight, Tom . . .'

'Corby's missing,' he said before she could say more. His hand closed over his mouth, shaking. 'Corby's missing,' he said through his fingers.

She stood motionless in the centre of the room. 'You mean again? Or you mean she didn't go back to school after the weekend?'

'She's missing, for Christ's sake! Missing!' His voice was a shout.

She was struck by how much he looked like a drunk from Cardboard City. His rumpled suit hung round him as if he had suffered some devastatingly sudden loss of weight. 'Just tell me, Tom,' she said. 'Sit down and tell me.'

'I can't sit down.' He began to pace the room. 'Monday the school assumed she was here with us. I assumed she was back at school. They called yesterday to see how she was.' He stopped. 'They got on to the police immediately.'

'The police have talked to the other girls, all her friends?'

'Nothing. Sunday night Corby just disappeared into thin air.'

'I don't believe it,' Claire said.

'For Christ's sake, what d'you mean you don't believe it?'

Claire took a deep breath. 'I don't believe it could have happened like that. One of her friends must know something.'

His hands waved in the air. 'What the hell are you saying? Teenage girls get pulled off the sidewalk into cars every day of the week. Are you saying it couldn't happen to Corby?'

'I'm saying that if she was in school early evening Sunday . . . was she?'

'Yes.'

'Then I'm saying she told someone if she was planning to sneak out.'

'Christ, what's happened to you in Moscow? I don't think you see this as serious at all!'

'Of course it's serious, Tom,' she said. 'But I'm trying to tell you something about Corby. All I know of Corby tells me she couldn't resist telling one of the girls if she planned to sneak out and meet someone. Boasting about it. The police ought to know that.'

'God in Heaven, do you hate her that much? So much you can't resist tearing her to pieces, even now.' He hurled the flat of his hand against the door. 'For Christ's sake, she's been missing nearly three whole days!' Tears were spraying from his eyes. 'Can't you imagine what could have happened to her? Don't you have any imagination at all, you cold, fucking Englishwoman?'

'I'm American.' The air hissed as she breathed in. 'Give me the number of the local police,' she said flatly.

'They've put Scotland Yard on to it, that's how seriously they're taking it.'

'They put Special Branch on to anything connected with the United States embassy,' she said calmly. 'You know that

better than I do. What number do I call? There are things they have to know about her. If you won't tell them, I will.'

They sat in a small room in New Scotland Yard, a desk bare of papers between them. Superintendent Jack Abbeline of Special Branch was still barely forty, with thick light brown hair parted high on one side, a well-sculpted face and grey friendly eyes, which, Claire thought, might look a lot less friendly in other circumstances. A long scar ran down the back of the right hand and disappeared into the sleeve of his grey suit. When she had first been shown into the room he had been finishing off a phone conversation in French, and pretty good French at that. Knowing nothing about policemen, she nevertheless had a strong feeling that this man would go far in his profession. 'So this is not the first time,' he said when she had explained why she had come.

'No. Not the first time from this school. Not the first time from other schools.'

'Was any disciplinary action ever taken?'

'She's been thrown out of two schools in three years. She's on a knife-edge at the present school, St Anthony's.'

'Your husband didn't make that clear to me when I spoke to him.'

'That's why I'm here.'

'Why was it, do you think, that Mr Garrison didn't mention it when I talked to him?'

She hesitated. 'I suppose he thought if he told you she had gone missing before, you might not take this time seriously Or on the other hand, he might have felt he was just protecting her. He's very protective about his sister.'

He nodded. He held a sharpened pencil over a pad but he

was taking no notes. 'When she was missing before, where did she go?' he said.

'Once to some people in Staffordshire, people she'd met at a party. Took time off school and went up to stay the weekend. They were artists.'

'Artists.'

'She's convinced artists don't mind people dropping in on them without warning. My husband was out of his mind with worry.'

'How long was she missing?'

'I think she called on the third evening. Having a great time. Could we square it with the school. We couldn't. She was expelled.'

'That was the longest absence?'

'No,' Claire said, frowning. 'There were two others that were similar in length. New and exciting boyfriends in each case. Somebody in films or the theatre. I don't need to paint you a picture.'

'You already have.' He paused, tapping on the desk-top with the perfectly sharpened pencil. Like everything else in the room it seemed never to have been used. 'These boyfriends, Dr Garrison. Were they ever boys of her own age? I get the impression they were mostly older men.'

'They were mostly older.' She paused, then said briskly, 'She's beautiful, and as far as I can make out, totally promiscuous.'

Not a muscle moved in his face. 'She attracts men of all ages quite easily, then.'

'Far too easily.'

He shifted his weight in the swivel chair. 'I'll ask you to give us a list of the dates and the people she went to stay with in each case on your way out, Dr Garrison. We'll have

to check on them, of course. And perhaps you'll look over the list of friends your husband has already given us. You might be able to add to it. We're going about finding her in two ways. First we're concentrating on her circle of friends outside the school. At the same time we're trying to establish how she left the Windsor area, always supposing she did.'

'Her normal way was to hitch a lift. The motorway runs a few hundred yards past the bottom of the school grounds.'

Abbeline's eyebrows lifted. 'A lift on a motorway. Good God,' he said softly.

'Dangerous, you're thinking.'

'Illegal. Dangerous for the accident you might cause. And dangerous for the type you might meet.' He placed the pencil on the unused notepad. 'Of course, we're taking this disappearance very seriously, Dr Garrison. But I'd like to ask you a question for my own guidance, if that's all right.'

'Depends on the question.'

He nodded. 'This is perhaps the third time Corby has been missing for this length of time, you say.'

'What was your question, Mr Abbeline?'

'My question is, do you believe she's with a friend?'

'She obviously could be. But does it matter what I believe?'

'It would be helpful for me to know.'

'I think I can guess what you're saying. You're a senior officer at Scotland Yard. You wouldn't for a moment have been called in on a case like this if it hadn't had an American embassy connection. You've got better things to do. You're looking for a short-cut.'

He smiled. 'I'm not looking for you to do my work for me, Dr Garrison. But a short-cut would be helpful. Anybody that's taken a particular interest in Corby recently.

Any man she's taken a particular interest in. Perhaps an older man.' His eyes met hers. 'Perhaps even one of your own friends?'

'One of my friends?'

'Or one of your husband's colleagues. I could make very discreet enquiries, I promise you.'

'You don't pull punches.'

'Not when it seems unnecessary.'

She thought hard. 'No. No short-cuts, I'm afraid. Something may occur to me when I take a look at the list Tom gave you.'

He nodded. 'If there were a new boyfriend, who would know?'

'You mean who would she confide in?' Claire said.

'You perhaps?'

'Certainly not me.'

'We got nothing at all from the statements we took from the girls at the school. They closed ranks and claimed they never talked to each other about such things.'

'There's a girl there named Emma Reardon-Smith. She seems to have decided Corby's some sort of wunderkind. If there was anything to tell, she could tell it.'

'But won't. How do you get on with her?'

'Christian names and no real trust.'

'Would you come down to Windsor with me?'

For some reason she was surprised at the idea. 'If you think it will help,' she said.

'It might. It might increase the pressure.'

'That's what you're looking for?' Claire asked.

'Questioning teenagers has become a question of that. Even the middle-class ones go through anti-establishment phases.'

'You're asking me for something you can use to pressurise her with?'

He nodded, his hands flat on the table.

'Let's see . . .' Claire mused to herself, already knowing what she was going to say.

'Is there anything?'

She paused for a moment longer. 'This will not do a lot of good to my relationship with Corby . . . or with Emma, for that matter.'

'Let's worry about that later.'

'Okay,' Claire said. 'Try asking Emma Reardon-Smith about The Show.'

6

Harry Bathgate was troubled. He found it impossible to concentrate on the cricket on TV. Yorkshire were fifty runs down with the tail-enders losing their wickets as fast as they made it to the crease. For the third or fourth time that afternoon he went into the kitchen for another beer. He was glad his wife was out. She would have noticed he was edgy, probably would have thought he was worrying about a sale. When there were so few buyers about a sale was worth the worry. But it wasn't work that was worrying. It was conscience.

He got his beer and went back to the television set. Figures in whites ran back and forth across the sunlit grass. The pavilion glistened in the sun. But his eyes were on the copy of the *Evening Standard* on the sofa. It was no use telling himself they all looked alike at her age. They didn't. This one was out of the ordinary. And she was American. Sister of someone high up in the American embassy.

It was her, all right. The one who'd got into the car and tried to get him to taxi her to Hammersmith. He would have done it if it hadn't been one street away from his own. Hard to resist a short skirt like that. And long legs. He puffed his cheeks. Fifty-five-year-old fool. But he'd meant no harm picking her up. Just wasn't going to be seen driving through his own neighbourhood with a pretty girl in the car

So he'd tried to kick her out and she'd raked her nails down his cheek. 'Explain that to the old woman when you get home,' she'd yelled, dancing off through the traffic stopped at the lights.

It had been difficult to explain to his wife, as the little bitch had known it would be. She couldn't have known that his wife was paranoiacally jealous about the reputation salesmen had. She hated all those TV jokes. But it was unmistakable what the scratches were. So he'd made up a story about trying to pull apart two women who were fighting in a motorway self-service.

His wife had just about accepted it after he'd added a few touches to make it seem more plausible. But she'd soon put two and two together if he now told her he was going to the police because the American girl in the paper had tried to hitch a lift from him.

On television Yorkshire were all out for 255 without Harry Bathgate really noticing. If he didn't go to the police the danger was that someone would come forward with the registration number of his Vauxhall Cavalier. Not impossible that one of the other drivers had seen what had happened at the red light, seen her scratching his face, decided it was a girl fighting to get out of the car, and memorised his number.

He switched off the TV. If somebody had his number it would be in the press tomorrow. There'd be a description of a middle-aged driver wanted to help the police with their enquiries, as the papers always put it.

It wouldn't be the way his wife put it if she saw that in tomorrow's *Standard*.

For a moment she didn't recognise him at the door. He was wearing jeans and a pale grey sweatshirt.

'No socks either,' he said, lifting his foot and plucking at the knee of his jeans.

She smiled. 'I thought senior Scotland Yard men were glued into their suits.'

He shrugged. 'Sixteen-year-old girls aren't over-impressed by suits any more. On a day like this I thought I might at least be comfortable.'

They went down the steps and got into the black police Jaguar. For a few minutes they drove in silence. Neither had any wish to speculate further about Corby.

'Why is it,' she said as they took the ramp onto the flyover, 'that senior Scotland Yard men always have such strangely apposite names. Fabian, Blackwatch, Slipper. You never hear of a Smith or Jones. It's as if promotion depends on having the right-quality name.'

'And you think Abbeline's the right quality?'

'Definitely.'

'I'm reassured,' he said. 'The truth's more prosaic. My father was a policeman. His father before him. There's been an Abbeline at Scotland Yard since the 1880s. Frederick Abbeline, my great-grandfather, was the man who *failed* to catch Jack the Ripper.'

'Is that so?' The sun lightened the leather interior of the car and they moved into the fast lane of the motorway. 'What happened to him?'

'He went on to solve a whole clutch of Victorian murders, but his reputation never recovered from the fact that he missed the big one.'

'Did your father rise high at the Yard?'

'At first.' She saw his face set slightly.

'At first . . . ?'

'Until he cornered a man with a sawn-off shotgun in an

alley. He took both barrels as he dived at him.'

'He was killed?'

'Paralysed. Paid off. He didn't find it easy. He's not a natural spectator.'

'It didn't put you off the job?'

He smiled. 'I was already a Hendon cadet.' When she frowned, he said: 'Sorry, Hendon Police College. Graduate entry. Thing is, for me, and thousands of others, once you've done police work it's hard to even think of anything else even half as interesting. Oh, I know we need surgeons, diplomats, car workers, but police work gives its own special buzz. Difficult to turn down, Dr Garrison.'

'Is there a Mrs Jack Abbeline?'

'No, but there's a pretty permanent Miss Jo Saunders.'

The bulk of Windsor Castle loomed briefly on their left, then disappeared behind a screen of trees. 'Take the turn-off here,' Claire said. 'The school's about a quarter of a mile on your left.'

Jack Abbeline eyed the tall girl in front of him. No student jeans and ragged sweater here. Tartan skirt, silk shirt, cashmere cardigan, expensive-looking shoes. Slightly overweight perhaps, eyes made up but no lipstick, full breasted, she looked about twenty-four years old. He began to wish he'd worn his suit.

He glanced at the list the school secretary had supplied him: Emma Reardon-Smith, daughter of John Reardon-Smith, QC and Nancy Reardon-Smith. Address in Chelsea not that far from the Garrisons. Class 23 . . . Miss Turnbull's house . . . aged 17 . . .

Claire, standing near the window, her back against the wall, responded to the girl's surprised greeting. 'I'm here,

Emma, because it's quite possible Corby is in serious trouble. I think you should remember that when you start answering Superintendent Abbeline's questions.'

The girl caught Claire's tone. 'If there's anything I can do to help, Claire,' she said. 'You know I'd do anything for Corby.'

'Sit down, Emma,' Abbeline said. From where he was sitting he could glance up and see woods and fields and the massive keep of Windsor Castle rising above the town. He fixed his eyes on the girl in front of him, waited until she shifted uncomfortably and said: 'It's been suggested to me that it was you who started The Show.'

Emma blushed, suddenly no longer looking like a young woman in her early twenties. She threw a quick accusing glance at Claire and looked back at Abbeline. 'What show?' she said transparently.

'We're not going to fool about, Emma,' Abbeline said. 'We don't have time for that. So let's start again.'

The girl hesitated, looking down into her lap. She mumbled something that neither Abbeline nor Claire could hear. Then she raised her head. 'It was just fun,' she said.

'Tell me.'

She shrugged uncomfortably. 'I don't see what it has to do with Corby bunking off . . .'

'None of this goes anywhere else, Emma,' Abbeline said 'That's a promise.'

'It was just fooling about,' she said.

'Tell me.' His voice was harder now.

Her hands came up from her lap and dropped heavily. 'There's not that much to tell. Pretty stupid when you think about it. The Show's a Sunday night stripping competition, that's all.'

'Stripping. Taking off your clothes?'

'You know, grind and bump,' she said defensively. 'For the benefit of the dirty-raincoat brigade down in the lane.'

'You kept the curtains drawn back?'

She nodded.

'This was your idea?' he said flatly.

'Mine and Corby's, really. Most of us had a go.'

Abbeline put his head in his hand. Looking up, he said: 'Has nobody told you what sort of men you could get out in that lane at night?'

She shrugged, lips pursed. She didn't like criticism.

'There was no mention of this in your statement, of course,' Abbeline said. 'What else did you miss out?'

'It's like telling tales.'

'You've got Mr Abbeline's promise it won't go further, Emma,' Claire said.

The girl glared briefly at her, then turned back to Abbeline. 'All right, what do you want to know?'

'Just tell me about Corby, the kind of girl she is.'

'Really?'

'Get on with it, Emma,' Claire said.

'You asked for it,' the girl said. 'All right . . .' She turned towards Abbeline. 'The thing about Corby is that she has this terrific imagination, so it's hard to know when what she's saying is . . .'

'The truth.'

'Or just fun.' For a moment the girl hesitated. 'The Show was just fooling about,' she said. 'All right, perhaps pretty stupid but no real harm done Corby on her own is different. She's really wild.'

'How?'

'How wild?' Emma's head came up, responding to the

challenge. 'Like she'd pick up a man in a pub and be dunking him in the back seat of his car within half an hour. Is that wild enough for you, Superintendent?' she said acidly She threw Claire a defiant glance.

'Dunking,' Abbeline said.

'You know.'

He nodded slowly. 'Sunday night. Did you know she was planning to . . . go out?'

The girl unwrapped a tube of yellow mints.

'Did you know, Emma?'

'This is in confidence, yes?'

'In confidence.'

She offered him a mint. Not Claire. When he shook his head she unpeeled one and popped it in her mouth, suddenly looking young again. At forty, Abbeline found all the normal signals scrambled by this girl.

'She told Julia and myself. She told us she was going over the wall. She said she was going to Paris with her new boyfriend.'

'Paris.'

'Yes.'

'You're sure of that?'

'That's what she said. She was going to Paris to see the Otto Dix exhibition.'

'Otto Dix?'

'Her boyfriend's favourite painter.'

'Do you know the boyfriend's name?'

'No.'

'What can you tell me about him?'

'Nothing, really. That's Corby for you.'

'What sort of age? Older than Corby?'

'Superintendent, it's anybody's guess. Ask Claire. You

never know with Corby. She'll tell you the truth in shocking detail or she'll make something up. Depends how she feels that day. You can't knock it, it's just the way she is.'

Abbeline frowned. 'You mean it's possible this new boyfriend doesn't even exist?'

She gave an exaggerated shrug. 'It's more she likes to make them out as mystery men. Men to take her to Los Angeles or St Petersburg or Paris. Artists, designers, photographers . . .'

'A dreamer?'

'Everybody dreams, don't they, Superintendent?'

'This current boyfriend . . . if he exists . . . there must be something you can tell me about him.'

'This one is super-mysterioso,' Emma said. She looked at Claire again.

'Super-mysterioso?'

'Everything about him, Corby says.'

'Such as?'

The girl shrugged at Claire. 'Such as Corby says the sex is fantastic.'

'Fantastic?' Abbeline said.

'Fantastic,' she repeated enthusiastically. 'Corby says it's the best she's ever had.'

Jack Abbeline nodded, trying not to scowl. Private school. Fees over half his annual salary. Castle view. Jesus . . . Lock up your daughters!

He and Claire left the school and walked out across the gravel drive to where he had left his car.

'I suppose it worked,' Claire said. 'Up to a point.'

'Thank you for coming, Dr Garrison,' Abbeline said. 'It did the trick. She felt you'd betrayed secrets about The Show so she took it out on Corby in front of you. Her way of getting

one back. Strange how the dynamics of an interview work. Thanks again,' he said as he opened the door of the police Jaguar for her.

'Have you changed your mind about this disappearance?' she said as she got into the back seat of the car 'Or is it still just a chore that you have to handle for the sake of Anglo-American relations?'

He followed her in and slid down in the leather seat, his face serious. 'I'm not avoiding any issues. It really is too early to say.' He shrugged 'This painter,' he said, 'Otto Dix, have you ever heard Corby mention him? Mention wanting to go to see the exhibition?'

'Not that I can remember. She talks a lot. I don't listen a lot. I'm afraid that's the way things are at home.'

He nodded. His mind was somewhere else. 'Schools like that,' he asked, 'how much do they set you back?'

'A lifetime sometimes,' Claire said grimly.

He nodded again and they drove towards London in silence.

7

The two men in the Galerie Royale were not tourists. Both were above-average height. Both in their mid thirties Both wore similar well-cut suits. From their few words of greeting spoken in French the woman at the desk guessed that the very dark-eyed one was a native Parisian. The other one, with light brown hair and grey eyes, was, she decided, American. A fluent speaker but still with the trace of an accent. She was in her sixties herself but both men were the sort, she reflected, that a woman could warm to.

The late afternoon sunlight illumined the cupola above their heads. Adam Garrison bought tickets and together the two men paced slowly into the gallery, switching from French to English now.

'This is a man who hates women.' Commissaire Marc Jacobi, head of the Anti-Terrorist Brigade of the Renseignement Général, waved his hand to embrace all the paintings in the long room, the painted prostitutes and crippled German soldiers. 'All women. Not just the whores who kept their legs when the front-line soldiers lost theirs. If Otto Dix had not been a great painter he would have been a serial murderer. A German Jack the Ripper. Look,' he said, excitement on his good-looking Semitic face, 'he even paints his fantasy.' With a hand on his friend's arm he stopped him under the picture of a woman lying with her throat cut. It

was entitled 'Lustmord.' 'They don't talk about that, the writers of these pretentious catalogues.' In disgust Jacobi slapped the booklet he was carrying against his other hand. 'They prefer their academic fairy tales. Realism, expressionism . . . It avoids the necessity of talking about the feelings that really stir the paint.'

'Did you get the *télécopie* from England?' Adam asked.

'A Special Branch Superintendent's on the case. Embassy connections. He sent it to Interpol. The office at Lyon forwarded it to me.' Jacobi faced him, his expression changing. 'It adds very little to the details your sister-in-law gave you. Your little sister Corby may be in Paris. She may not be.'

'Claire said something about a possible new boyfriend.'

Jacobi shrugged. 'The British police don't think much of it as a lead. A super-mysterioso new lover as one of the schoolfriends put it. The sex is fantastic . . .'

'She's sixteen,' Adam said. 'She's a fantasist.'

'Does she know Paris?'

'I've never asked her over for a vacation if that's what you mean.'

They stood facing each other in the almost empty gallery. 'Why do you turn your face so bleakly against your family, Adam?' Jacobi asked.

Adam ignored the question. 'What else d'you have? No description of the man.'

Jacobi shook his head. 'No.'

'What were they going to do in Paris? Or is that a naive question?'

'The story is that, among other things no doubt, they planned to come here, to the Galerie Royale. Otto Dix is said to be the super-mysterioso lover's favourite painter.'

Jacobi waved his arm to encompass a whole wall of paintings. 'But which Otto Dix? Harmless anti-capitalist, anti-war Otto Dix? Or the other Otto Dix . . . ?' Jacobi was staring up at a painting of a parade of whores being humbly saluted by a legless soldier. 'That Otto . . . full of hatred for women?'

Adam Garrison let his eye roam back to the 'Lustmord' canvas. Suddenly it seemed to carry a compulsiveness he hadn't noticed before.

At nine o'clock on Wednesday and Friday evenings in summer, Dennis Topless, a tall, broad figure in his mid fifties, left his house in Rectory Road in the riverside London village of Barnes and walked his ageing golden retriever towards the Sun Inn. At the bar Topless would order a half-pint of bitter, pay for it and drink two quick mouthfuls before leaving. He would never stop to say more than a word or two to the landlord, and was never seen in conversation with any of the other regulars. Wednesday after Friday after Wednesday he would order his half-pint, and drink no more than a mouthful or two. It was enough for him to say with truth he had been there, enough to leave the faint odour of beer on his breath when his wife returned from mid-life aerobics and asked him if he'd enjoyed his pint.

Outside the inn he would look across to the pond where a dark-haired woman, a little younger than his own fifty-five years, sat on a bench watching her black retriever chase the ducks along the water's edge.

Her nod was barely perceptible. Enough to make Dennis Topless wait, as he had on rain-free Wednesday and Friday evenings for the last year, until Maureen O'Brien stood up, called her dog and clipped a leather lead to its collar. Only

then did Dennis Topless set off, unhurriedly, towards the river.

The place they had long ago selected was screened from the road, a wooden bench on the towpath overlooking the river. When Maureen arrived a few minutes after Topless she would release her dog and sit beside him on the bench, often with just a small smile. More usually perhaps with a warning to the dog about getting too close to the water, to cover embarrassment, as dog owners do.

Dennis was no less embarrassed. The first few minutes were always difficult. Everything about falling in love in what he liked to call the sunset years was difficult. But it was what made his life worth living. He had come to depend on their one hour together every Wednesday and Friday evening.

Slowly they began to talk. About the dogs, of course, now running together along the towpath, then about small incidents in the days they had been apart.

They seldom spoke about themselves, about their own feelings. They talked in the third person: When someone loves someone . . . or: A woman can be very selfish when she's in love . . . In the beginning, in the first month, they had kissed and he had put his hand into the fold of her coat and been surprised at the hardness of her nipple. But then she had explained to him, calmly, that if they were to go on meeting nothing further was possible out in the open on a bench. She was a Catholic mother who could not pretend she didn't know right from wrong.

After that he had always kissed her once each meeting, a goodnight kiss, but had never ventured to put his hand inside her coat.

But tonight he had important information for her. Beryl

his wife, had announced she liked the idea of doing a longer aerobics class on Fridays. He had worked out that, with warm-ups before and coffee and cake after, she would be away most of the evening. 'It would mean,' Dennis said, 'I could take the car. We could go for a drive sometimes.'

She lifted her eyebrows. Both were suffused by imaginings of the warm intimacy of the car.

'The car,' she said softly.

He smiled. 'Could you make it a little longer of a Friday?' he asked her.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'Just now and again.'

'Better than sitting out here in all weathers.'

'It would be, yes.' She glanced at him with a small smile. Then she reached out and put her hand on his, a gesture she had never made before.

'Next Friday,' he said, 'if you come straight here, I'll park the car across the road.'

She squeezed his hand, her fingernail rotating slowly in his palm.

Avoiding each other's glance they looked out across the river. From Hammersmith two school eights struggled inexpertly against the tug of the outgoing tide. On the far bank a coach on a bicycle shouted instructions through a loudhailer. They followed the progress of the boats until they passed under Barnes railway bridge.

'Time to be getting back,' she said. Automatically he consulted his watch before nodding agreement.

The dogs came romping back towards the bench, Maureen's dog in the lead, turning and snapping at a piece of cloth the other dog had retrieved.

Topless got up from the bench. He had calculated the movement so that when she stood he could slide his arm

around her waist. He was no longer satisfied by her knowledge of right and wrong. 'He's picked up something,' Maureen said, nodding towards the running dogs.

Topless turned. 'Come here, boy,' he called. 'What's that you've got there?' He took four or five steps towards the dog and bent over, pulling a muddy cloth from his dog's jaws.

He started. He was holding a pale cream miniskirt in his hands. Torn and muddy and wet from the dog's mouth, it still looked as if it might be almost new, the label in the waistband silky and expensive. His hands began to shake slightly. The large patch of darkness down the front of the skirt he knew to be blood. Standing where he was, he could see the river's edge where the dogs had been playing. He could see a dark blue shoe and other things, perhaps a woman's underclothes. He was sure he knew what he was looking at.

'What is it?' Maureen O'Brien called from the bench.

His mind raced. The police would want to know how often he came here. Who he was with. It would be the end of their meetings. The certain end.

He looked round. He was standing within a pace of the footpath litter bin. Behind him he could hear the rattle as she attached her dog's lead. His back to her, he rolled the miniskirt and shoved it into the bin.

She stood, waiting for the goodnight kiss. He called his dog. It was their practice, when they parted after the kiss, for him to cross the road, and they would walk in parallel back towards Barnes High Street. His mind was on the bloodied piece of cloth in the litter bin. 'Friday, then,' he said, forgetting all about the kiss.

* * *

They had dinner in Soho and were back at Old Church Street before midnight. 'Nothing to be sorry about. Your father fascinates me,' Steven Ross said, in response to her apology.

'But it's true all the same – I talk too much about him. He was such a hell of a dominant figure in my childhood. Later, even. In my teens.'

'And now?'

'I've got him in proportion, I think. In the last resort I'd cut throats to protect him, if he ever needed it. You want brandy?' she asked.

He raised his eyebrows in assent. 'I suppose it's obvious he was deeply scarred by his life in the Soviet camps '

She poured brandy for him. Malt whisky for herself. 'He never forgets it,' she said. 'He's one of those extraordinary men, and I think they always are extraordinary, who have made his obsession his life. Perhaps they don't even have a choice.'

'What drove him, d'you think? What made him set up the Midas Foundation?'

She shrugged. 'My mother used to say that when they were first married he would shout in Russian in his sleep. Frightening shouts. And then he'd whisper, almost whimper. And wake up screaming in a cold sweat. He was in the camps during the worst days, the last years of Stalin's life.'

'Where was he?'

'Mostly in a Strict Regime camp called Brogula, near Murmansk. A gold-mining camp. That's where he was first called Midas. In the Arctic winter they saw no daylight between October and March. Workshifts were ten hours a day. Men died like flies from cardiac exhaustion at the age of thirty.' She shuddered.

'It affects you deeply too,' he said.

'It made him the man he is. For good and bad. He's pretty eccentric. Crazily generous, far too indulgent if you like, to me . . .'

'Does he like Tom?'

'Despises him, I'm afraid. At first Midas was all in favour. Like a lot of others he saw Tom as a rising star. State Department politics, the Senate maybe, then who knows.'

'Now your father thinks it won't happen?'

She nodded. 'And the hostility's mutual. Tom thinks he brought me up as a spoiled brat.'

'Spoiling's a theme in your household.'

'Tom may see it differently, but I'm over the worst with Midas. Even if he still embarrasses me at Foundation meetings by calling me kitten.'

'Kitten?'

They both laughed.

Just before midnight Tom called. His voice sounded different, heavier. Not drunk, just deeper. But she had drunk four whiskies herself so perhaps she wasn't hearing too clearly.

'Claire, I'm sorry about this afternoon,' he said. 'I wanted to say I'm sorry.

'Forget it, Tom. No news, I suppose?'

'I'm coming over, Claire, I've got to talk to you. I want to come back.'

She felt sick to her stomach. If she said yes now, while the shadow of Corby was hanging over them, she was also saying forget what happened last Sunday. Forget Joyce Hartmann. And Corby would turn up tomorrow saying, 'Hi, Claire, why the glum looks?' and the whole miserable roundabout would creak into action again. She lifted her Scotch and took a mouthful. 'Not yet, Tom,' she said.

'If you're not okay there, go round to Bill Trilling for the night.'

'The cop you went to see, Abbeline, he's been talking to some of Corby's friends. He thinks Corby went off with some man she'd been seeing. There was talk of her going to Paris,' he said.

She was impressed that Abbeline had not told him she had been there at the school when he questioned Emma. 'Have you spoken to Adam?' she asked to fill the silence.

'Why should I?'

She decided not to tell him she had already called. 'Corby's Adam's sister too,' she said. 'And if there's any checking to be done in Paris . . .'

'What would Adam do about it? What has he ever done about Corby?'

She wished to God she hadn't mentioned Adam.

'All Adam does is sit on his ass in his deluxe lawyer's office on the Boulevard Something and pretend he doesn't have a family, or family responsibilities. When did he last call me?'

'I don't know, Tom.'

'I'll tell you when . . .'

'Don't, Tom,' she said. 'Don't work yourself up about Adam.'

He grunted. She was praying for him to put the phone down.

'Who was that guy? The guy at the house today.'

'I told you,' she said. 'Someone I met in Moscow.'

'Is he there now?'

She hesitated. 'Yes.' She turned to Steven Ross who shrugged from his seat in the corner of the sofa.

'You invited him back.'

'I asked him to come over for the drink I couldn't give him before.'

'I see.' His voice sounded suddenly very clear. 'I have no right to ask you this,' he said. 'But, Claire, don't spend the night with him.'

'Wow,' she said softly. 'You are something.'

'I'll call you as soon as there's more news. Don't spend the night with him. I love you. Always remember that.'

There was something she didn't quite pick up in his tone. 'What does that mean?' she asked.

'What it says. Always remember that I love you.'

'Whatever happens . . .? Is that what you're saying?'

'That's what I'm saying.' He put the phone down.

'I'll get some ice,' she said to Steven Ross.

In the kitchen she leaned against the stove and thought about Tom's words. The obvious implication was if you sleep with Steven Ross tonight, I'll still love you. Don't do it, but it won't be fatal.

Yet there was something else in his tone. She got the ice out of the refrigerator and put it in a bowl. Something that suggested another interpretation: whatever happens in the immediate future, remember I'll always love you.

She walked back into the living-room, musing.

Steven Ross was standing, one elbow on the mantelpiece. He tipped his brandy glass and finished his drink. 'Something tells me this is not the night to press my suit.'

She reached up and touched her lips against his cheek. 'You have a sixth sense.'

He smiled. 'Aren't all we Russians supposed to have it?' he said.

She grimaced doubtfully and slipped her arm through his as they walked through into the hall.

'I've decided to stay this side of the Atlantic for a few extra days,' he said.

'Work?'

'I could pretend it was,' he said slowly, 'but not really. Leave is a fairly informal thing at Amnesty. I think my boss wouldn't object to a few days. I may even see a few people at the same time. How do you feel about that?'

They stood facing each other. 'Good,' she said. 'I feel very good about that.'

'I'll call you tomorrow morning,' he said. He squeezed her arm and let himself out. She walked back into the living-room and watched him down the road. He didn't walk, he strolled, one hand in his pocket, with an extraordinary physical grace, like a slender, powerful animal moving along a jungle path. Then she laughed as he broke the spell, executing a sidekick and a crazy wave to her neighbour Anthea Buckhurst who was watching him from her bedroom window.

8

'I'm going to have a few days free at the end of the week,' Jo Saunders said on Wednesday morning as she got out of bed.

He opened his eyes. She stretched for Abbeline to admire her, stuck out her tongue when he did and put on her robe.

She was not slender, he was thinking. Not really Junoesque either. Well-built? Yes, but the term smacked of naval construction. He grunted. At six o'clock in the morning it was too much for him.

'Problems?' she asked. 'About this weekend?'

'No. I was just thinking of how to describe you, rising like that, naked, from the bed.'

'How about . . .' she considered . . . 'eminently fuckable?'

He nodded agreement.

She sat on the side of the bed. 'So I'm entirely at your disposal. No Friday shoot. Or Saturday. Nothing for me anyway.'

'They're not dropping you from the show?' He had turned onto his elbow to face her. 'The scriptwriters aren't even now planning some spectacular end for you?'

She stood up, her smile fading. 'You'd like that, would you, Jack? You'd like me to leave the show?'

He shook his head. 'Of course not. This programme's a sort of family to you after four years, I understand that

True enough, it might make it marginally easier to see each other, but that's all I have against *The Scattersby Inheritance.*'

'It's not always me who can't make it,' Jo said defensively. With her right hand she was flipping her thick dark hair back over her head, a measure of her agitation. In a moment, Abbeline thought, she'll announce she needs to wash her hair.

'I must wash my hair,' Jo said.

'This weekend,' he said. 'It'd be good to do something.' He got out of bed rapidly and pulled on his jeans. It was her apartment; he hadn't yet moved in more than a toothbrush and razor He came close to her and put his hands on her hips.

'How are you fixed,' she said; 'Friday to Tuesday?'

'They *do* plan to kill you off.

This time she smiled. 'Friday to Tuesday,' she repeated.

'Depends,' he said, twisting his fingers through her hair.

'On what?'

'On whether some American teenager has just bunked off school to spend time with a boyfriend . . .'

'Or . . . ?' She raised an eyebrow.

'You've got it. But if Corby Garrison turns up today, I'll take leave and we'll spend a long weekend in the Yorkshire Dales.'

'Or Biarritz.'

'You might catch a suntan. Make-up wouldn't like that. In the Yorkshire Dales you're in no danger.'

'You remember that last weekend in Biarritz?'

'In all its pornographic detail.'

'No danger of a suntan, then.'

'Even though it was eighty degrees outside.'

'So . . . Biarritz?'

'Someplace. Keep your fingers crossed for Corby Garrison.'

At ten o'clock that morning Claire left the house wearing trainers and a blue tracksuit. It was a clear summer morning with a slight salt breeze coming off the tidal river. Jogging easily down to Chelsea Old Church she turned west to continue along the riverbank towards World's End. When Steven Ross had left her last night she had sat on for a few minutes downstairs wondering what she would have done if he'd suggested staying. He hadn't and that had solved the problem.

That problem, at least. For the moment. There were plenty of other problems. She still found it difficult to believe that Corby was off on anything more than an escapade. Perhaps if she were more honest she was just resentful at being forced, once again, to put Corby centre-stage in her life. What she wanted, she thought as she jogged along the embankment, was to come to decisions about Tom and herself free from the shadow of Corby's disappearance.

But that was just not possible. By any measure, even if it had all happened before, Corby was missing.

She ran on in anger and confusion. She knew that most of all she must retain a freedom to decide on what to do about Tom. Not necessarily to be rid of him for ever. She didn't even know yet if that's what she wanted. But at least freedom to make a new choice. Freedom perhaps to have an affair with Steven Ross. The thought prompted a sudden change of mood. Her anger seemed to flow away as she ran on smoothly, the river glittering on her left.

Was it the idea of an affair with Steven that had this effect

on her, she wondered. Or was it just the thought of being in bed with any man, the liberating fact that Tom's infidelity had suddenly opened up the possibility for her too? For the next fifty yards she mused on that. A young man was coming towards her from the other direction – early thirties, in a crisp white shirt and jeans. She imagined, as she came closer, being in bed with him. She imagined it in detail.

He caught her eye and smiled at her and said good morning as she jogged past him and her spirits were lifted by the sheer surprise of realising what her expression could so quickly reveal. Something, she recognised, was definitely happening to her. But whether the engine of change was finding Tom in bed with Joyce Hartmann or her own meeting with Steven Ross was not something she could yet be certain of.

And then the shadow of Corby's disappearance descended again. Could it really be serious this time? She had to tell herself it could be. But she still didn't believe it.

She jogged on past Battersea Bridge and the mulberry tree said to have been planted by Sir Thomas More, then crossed the traffic to run down the butt-end of Blantyre Street where Kate Kavanagh lived.

It was Thursday, and on Thursday mornings Kate kept her patient-list free. Claire rang the bell and waited, imagining Kate leaving her office (separate from her consulting- room in the big apartment) where she would be catching up on her patient-notes. To Claire's mind Kate lived an orderly life. Men friends or hangovers notwithstanding, the week's patient-notes were always written up Thursday morning. Claire's complaint against her was that she never behaved like ordinary mortals: if she drank too much she fought her way through her hangovers, never slouched around the next morning in jeans and dripped mayonnaise from a tuna

sandwich. There were men in her life but even from Claire she kept them discrete, shadowy. The subject of a joke more than the relay of information between old friends.

Standing on the doorstep, waiting, Claire remembered moments of doubt in Moscow, about whether or not she would tell Kate what had happened. The Irish girl had been her best friend since undergraduate days, a natural confidante. Yet more lately Claire had found something strangely distancing about Kate's chosen profession. You didn't always want to confide in a friend, even a best friend, who was also a psychiatrist.

Reaching forward, she pressed the bell.

As a Harrods Warehousing senior supervisor, Dennis Topless spent an unhappy first hour on the unloading bay that Thursday morning. Checking off the Food Store cartons usually absorbed him totally. He was known throughout Warehousing for his meticulous approach to the job. But this morning his conscience was troubling him He knew perfectly well he should have gone straight to the police. He even sensed that, by putting the torn miniskirt in the garbage bin, he was destroying evidence.

He had no doubt there had been a murder. He reminded himself that that stretch of river was no stranger to the discovery of murdered girls. Not much over ten years ago the bodies of three prostitutes had been found on the Chiswick and Barnes banks over a period of as many weeks And vaguely he remembered other cases, up-river perhaps . . . He forced himself to concentrate on the number of cartons stacked for his inspection and recorded them on his chart. Pâté du Périgord, sixteen dozen, Gourdon, France. It was work that required concentration, he told himself, not half a

mind here in the warehouse, half a mind on what must have happened on that riverbank.

At just after ten o'clock he was able to take his first stand-down. The next truck in his bay was not due for half an hour. He checked to see if he had change in his pocket, took off his brown overall, and in his short-sleeved shirt walked outside as if to stand in the sun. There was a phone box less than two hundred yards away.

Dennis Topless strolled towards it. He wondered how long it would take the police to trace a call. Nervously he punched out the number of Barnes police station. When a girl's voice answered he swallowed hard. 'I'm calling to report certain articles found on the riverbank near the White Hart public house,' he said formally. 'Women's clothes,' he continued, fighting an attack of panic. 'Women's clothes with blood on them.'

'Can I have your name, sir?' the girl asked calmly.

'No,' he said. 'It isn't important. Look in the litter bin there. If it hasn't been emptied you'll find a skirt . . .' His voice trailed away. Before the girl could ask again for his name he put the phone down.

In Chelsea, Kate Kavanagh opened the door. She was dressed as Claire might have predicted. No tuna sandwich. The collar of a cream silk shirt showed at the turtleneck of a dark green cashmere sweater. A skirt and black pumps. One hand on the doorhandle, her fist balled on her jutting hip, her regular features were twisted into an exaggerated frown. 'You must have had a rough reception in Russia,' she said.

'I look that bad?'

'You look hungover. Come in.'

They went into the kitchen. 'Coffee?' Kate walked across to fill the kettle.

Claire nodded and collapsed into a chair, her eyes on her friend. On Kate's Irish chestnut hair, on the way she moved as she crossed and recrossed the kitchen getting cups and coffee pot. They had shared an apartment together on Brattle Street, behind Harvard Square. Close friends still with an edge of rivalry that Kate had not recognised until too late, when Tom had switched his attention from the Irish girl to Claire.

Kate stopped in the middle of the tiled floor. 'Tom called last night to tell me about Corby,' she said, a trace of Irish still with her.

'Was he still sober enough to be able to speak?'

Kate raised her eyebrows. 'He sounded pretty distraught,' she said, not quite answering the question. 'Is it more serious than the last time she ran away from school?'

'The police think it might be,' Claire said. 'It's possible she was seeing some man twice her age.'

'Twice her age still makes him a year younger than us,' Kate said. 'You're not too worried yourself?'

Claire sighed. 'I don't think so. Not yet. Frankly I've spent too much of my recent life worrying about Corby. Maybe if she doesn't call Tom by tonight . . .' She watched in silence as Kate remembered to switch on the kettle. When Tom called Kate, had he also told her what else happened last Sunday night?

'How was Moscow?' Kate asked.

'I tried to see you before I went.' Claire's eyes roved around the kitchen. 'Sunday night.'

'I've been away for a few days. Professor Macdonald from Cambridge was holding a seminar in Edinburgh. He's asked

me to fly up there again this afternoon to talk to some of his graduate students.' She glanced round at Claire for a moment. 'Pretty good, huh?'

'That's good, Katie,' Claire said. 'Macdonald's the leading man.'

'Quite a feather in my cap.' Her eyes were on Claire. 'Is it just a hangover?' she asked.

'No I drank too much last night, but it's not just a hangover.' Claire smoothed her hands across the knees of her tracksuit. 'Here we go, then.'

Kate looked at her curiously.

'Tom didn't say anything on the phone?' Claire asked.

Kate turned to the sink. 'About what?'

Claire hesitated. 'About me walking in last Sunday night and finding him humping Joyce Hartmann,' she said.

The Irish girl turned slowly from the sink. 'You walked in on him . . .'

'In my own bedroom . . .'

Kate left the kettle to boil and sat down at the white kitchen table. 'You walked into your bedroom and found Tom in bed with Joyce Hartmann?'

Claire raised her eyebrows at her friend. 'You've got it, Katie.'

Kate nodded slowly. 'Do you want to tell me how it happened?'

'I think I want to tell you.'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't want to talk to my psychiatrist.'

'I'm not your psychiatrist.'

'I can never understand why you didn't choose straightforward, common or garden medicine.'

'Do you want to tell me this story?'

'I do. I want to tell you, yes. But just as my good friend Kate.'

'I see my patients in the consulting-room,' Kate said. 'We're in the kitchen; let's stay in the kitchen.'

Sitting back in the black leather kitchen chair, Claire told the story of Sunday night. She had reached the slap.

Kate shook her head. 'Did the two of you never try to lay down some guidelines about the way you should both deal with Corby?'

'Deal with her?'

'Deal with her wishes, demands, needs . . .'

'For Christ's sake, Kate, you know how it is with Tom. If Corby has any wishes, demands, needs, as you put it, she gets them. For the asking. She barely has to wheedle twice '

'Okay, what happened then, after you slapped him?'

Claire took a deep breath and described trying to call Kate from the Competition Club, then the drive to Windsor and arriving back at Old Church Street.

Kate sat listening, leaning forward, her lips pressed, only her eyes moving restlessly from Claire to the window, from Claire to the desk, from Claire to the door. At the kettle's insistent boiling she got up and began to make coffee.

'Don't read too much into this,' Claire said, 'but what I'd really like is a large brandy to help the coffee down.'

'You know where it is. Pour me one while you're about it.' Kate looked at her watch. 'Ten-thirty in the morning. Jesus Christ!'

The dining-room shared a door with the kitchen. Claire walked through and took a bottle of brandy and two glasses from the dining-room cupboard. 'I came back,' Claire said. 'The house was dark . . .'

Kate pushed down the plunger and poured coffee into

two large blue cups When she pushed a cup across the white table-top it left a faint coffee smear. 'I'm listening,' she said.

'I went into the living-room, made a quick call to Midas in New York.' Claire poured two glasses of brandy. 'Then I went upstairs. Quietly, so as not to wake Tom.'

Kate sipped brandy and coffee alternately, gave up and poured the brandy into the big blue cup.

'I didn't want Tom to think there was an intruder in the house.' Claire gave a short laugh. 'Turned out there was one there already.'

Kate was leaning forward, cradling her coffee cup, her rich brown hair hanging down over her eyes.

'Look at me, Katie,' Claire said. 'I can get through this. There's been time. Time to get over the first shock. You don't have to be embarrassed.'

Kate sat down, brushing her hair back with her hand. 'Okay. Go on.'

Claire said nothing for a moment. She raised her palms to the side of her face. 'Maybe it's not as easy as I thought.' She dropped her hands to her lap. 'Let's see, now. How did it go? House dark. No music. Tom plays a lot of opera, happy or sad. So he's in bed. I walk upstairs, think I hear something. Dammit, know I hear something. Open the bedroom door. Light off, curtains drawn. Blankets ballooning, legs flying. The smell of sex. Juices. I thought I was going to be sick. Violently sick to my stomach.' She shuddered. 'I'm a well-brought-up girl. never be sick over your husband's piece of ass. I suppose I headed for the bathroom. Tom was out on the landing with me before I knew it. He's there standing naked. Shivering with shock. I run into the bathroom, lock the door. Yell to him to get

her out of the house. And escape into the shower. More water spurting from the eyes than the shower-head.'

Claire poured herself another brandy. 'At this point I didn't know who she was. Or I suppose I guessed. Joyce Hartmann has been gunning for Tom since she first met him. He's always denied it, of course.' She was silent, not touching the brandy. 'I suppose she had a car waiting, I don't know. When I came out of the bathroom, he was downstairs. I asked him how long this had been going on and he said it was the first time. He'd had to phone Joyce on embassy business. She thought he sounded strained, whatever. Invited herself over.'

'Sounds about right,' Kate said.

'About right!'

'As if it might have been like that. What did you do then?'

'I think I was in shock. I couldn't take the idea of a night in the house. You were out somewhere. I just collected up the cases I'd already packed for Moscow and took off for the Foundation. Spent the night on the cot in my office and took a cab to the airport next morning.'

The early edition of the *Evening Standard* reaches inner London somewhere around lunchtime. Prominently centre-right on the front page, that Thursday's edition carried another picture of the missing American girl. The police were appealing for any driver who might have given her a lift on Sunday night. In particular they wished to interview the driver of a Jaguar reported seen giving a lift to a young woman on the M4 motorway near Windsor. The report stressed that the police were anxious to eliminate the Jaguar driver from their enquiries.

Outside his local pub, the Dove at Hammersmith, Harry Bathgate sat in his white Cavalier, with a copy of the *Standard* in his lap. The worry that never left him now was that someone had seen, what was her name, Corby, getting into a white Cavalier. Someone who had a memory for car registration numbers.

He got out of the Cavalier and went into the pub. Leaning morosely on the bar, he ordered a pint of beer and a ploughman's lunch While he waited he stared up at the tobacco-stained ceiling. Sixteen years old! He would have said late teens. American, he knew that from the voice. At a private school somewhere near Windsor. He shuddered, his heavy belly pressed against the bar. Who was going to believe he'd done nothing. Nothing at all. And got some nasty scratches down his face for his pains!

On the inside front page there was another picture of her. Full length, in a tennis skirt, holding a racket. If his wife ever discovered she was the girl who had scratched his face Sunday night!

The barman delivered his bitter and ploughman's and he munched miserably. He could phone the police, of course, and hope they couldn't trace the call. But just suppose that the piece of information he had to give them was useless. As it could easily be. Then, if they did succeed in tracing him through the car, he'd be in worse trouble than ever. An anonymous phone caller giving misleading information, what would they make of that?

In any case it was too late to help the girl. It must be. She'd been missing since Sunday night, after all. Looking like that, hitching lifts, it didn't need a lot of imagination to guess what might have happened to her. His stomach turned over at the thought But he finished his beer and set out for

Ealing where he had Smart's Stores, one of his most dependable customers, to see.

They sat in silence.

'Can you handle a very dumb question?' Kate said.

'I guess so.'

'Do you love him?'

'Is that a dumb question?'

'Coming from a psychiatrist it could seem so.'

Claire shrugged. 'It may be a dumb question,' she said. 'It's not an easy one.'

'You always look good together. Like a pair, I mean.'

'You know he's drinking too much.'

Kate hesitated. 'I don't think I'd noticed anything.'

'Joyce Hartmann had.'

'What's that mean?'

Claire passed her hand across her face. 'After a private dinner at the Residence the week before last she asked Tom and myself to stay for a nightcap. She had things to say to Tom, things she thought, in fairness, as she put it, I should hear too.'

'What sort of things?'

'About the amount he was drinking.'

'She said that with you there?'

Claire nodded. 'Doesn't sound like the woman whose legs I saw kicking merrily in the air on Sunday night, I agree. But Joyce doesn't let her pleasure get in the way of doing the job. Or doing the job get in the way of her pleasure '

'You still haven't answered my dumb question.'

'I'm having difficulty. Love's a habit, isn't it? Best not asked too much about?' She dropped her head. 'I don't know, Katie. I'm scared to question the habit because I might come

up with the answer that I never did really love Tom much beyond an undergraduate infatuation.'

Kate's features tightened. 'Is that all you think it was?'

Claire lifted her head. 'No. Sorry, Katie. No . . . I didn't mean to say that. Of course I thought I loved Tom when I married him. Things just didn't turn out quite as I'd imagined afterwards.'

Kate nodded slowly. 'So you haven't decided what you'll do?'

'Why?' Claire said. 'Do I have to right away?'

'No . . .' Kate spread her arms. 'Your life.'

'Sorry, Katie. I can't answer questions about Tom. About my marriage. About why I married . . . I avoid them if I can.'

'Because you know you should have married Adam?'

'I don't know that, Kate.'

'He does.'

'Maybe once. No longer.' She paused. 'Adam was one of those impossibly romantic happenings. Not the basis for anything. And over, Kate. Definitely over.'

'Let's have another brandy,' Kate said. 'It's less than professional to say it – but sometimes it beats talking.'

Claire nodded. 'The truth is, Katie, I just don't know what I'm going to do now.' She hesitated. 'Something happened in Moscow that makes it all even more crazily difficult than I thought possible.'

'You met a man?'

'I met a man.'

'Someone you like?'

'Very much.'

'Enough to go to bed with?'

'I didn't. Haven't.' Claire smiled. 'So far. Give me that brandy, will you?'

Kate poured the brandy. 'So far, you said.'

Claire nodded. 'That's right. We all know about rebounds. Don't we?'

9

Katie had been good. Claire jogged slowly back along the embankment, watching a sailing boat bouncing cheerfully across the glittering water. It was wonderful how much and how little these psychologists could say. But her dumb question had been the right question. If Claire had any real wish to save her marriage there was no point in fooling about with Steven Ross. If she loved Tom . . .

But why pretend?

She stopped just before Battersea Bridge and leaned on the granite parapet of the embankment. She stood staring out across the water, the noise of traffic behind her lost upon her consciousness. Of course she had made a mistake in marrying Tom. On the darkest nights she had blamed Midas for his encouragement. But she knew that to be nonsense. The decision had been hers. And the decision was the wrong decision. Wasn't that the way it always worked out for spoilt little rich girls?

Back to Katie. Warm, friendly Katie Enigmatic Kate

She hadn't seemed surprised. Not really surprised. Hadn't asked why Tom and Joyce Hartmann were doing it in the house in Old Church Street when there was all the opportunity they needed when they worked late together at the embassy Safe from prying wives.

A sailboat skidded across the surface of the water, elegant

as a pencil beneath the bellying white canvas. Kate had been good. But she hadn't said much. She hadn't offered that all-encompassing warmth and comfort Claire had expected. Why not?

But she had been good.

And sort of awkward too. Maybe she preferred hearing these stories from a patient on a couch.

Claire walked on, thinking of Kate. Perhaps less than everything had been said during their talk this morning.

Jack Abbeline walked with Commander Loverel along the Scotland Yard corridor. 'So are we in trouble, Jack?' the senior officer asked.

'Unless she's in Paris, I'm sure we are,' Abbeline said. 'She's been missing before but never this long. If she were staying with friends in this country the press coverage should have brought a phone call at least. There are also one or two special features I don't like about the whole thing.'

'The report of a girl being picked up by a Jaguar near Windsor?'

Abbeline shook his head. 'Hitch-hiking was her standard means of travel. True, the driver hasn't come forward, but you know as well as I do there are a dozen reasons for that. All more or less innocent. I still think I'm more interested in this mysterious boyfriend the girls talk about.'

They reached the Commander's office. 'You mean you really think she's in Paris?'

'I don't *think* she's in Paris. I'm hoping she's in Paris.'

'You know your head's on the block with this one, don't you?' Loverel said cheerfully. 'Embassies are always trouble. The American embassy's more trouble than the rest. It's only your friends can really hassle you.' His tone changed. 'But

there's no room for a slip here, Jack. The girl has to be found. London or Paris. One way or another.'

He meant dead or alive.

The unit had broken for lunch. Obeying the unspoken strict sense of hierachy in the otherwise liberal film business, the extras and crew ate lunch on the grass while the producer, director and leading members of the cast sat at small aluminium tables under the oak trees on the riverbank at Hurlingham. Only a unit stills photographer, wandering with his camera, wasn't eating. Jo Saunders, made-up and dressed for her part as Molly Parkinson, the serial's *femme fatale* with the heart of gold, watched as Abbeline crossed the grass towards her. She got to her feet, smiling.

'You made it,' she said. 'I'm really pleased.'

'Can we have a few minutes together first?'

'Sure. You're going to tell me you can't make Biarritz, aren't you?'

Abbeline shook hands with those members of the cast he knew, exchanged a few words with Sepp Lander, the producer, and allowed himself to be led away by Jo. She had swept up a bottle of white wine and a couple of glasses on the way and she set them down on a table a few yards apart.

'No Biarritz?' she said.

'Not even any Yorkshire Dales. We've just turned up something.'

'Not the American girl?'

'Almost as bad. Some clothes on the riverbank down-river from here. I'm on my way there now.'

'No chance at all you'll be able to make it this weekend?'

'If they're not her clothes. If she phones from Paris or Tokyo or wherever she's been taken off to . . .'

'Leo's keen on Biarritz.'

He smiled grimly. 'Your dead-beat husband's keen on any free ride he can lay hands on. There's something to do this weekend, if you're free. Divorce him.'

She looked at Abbeline. 'What would be the point of that, exactly?'

Without answering he turned his head away. When he looked back at her he said: 'Sorry about this weekend, Jo.'

She nodded. 'Let's go and find ourselves some lunch.'

'I can't stay,' he said. They stood up and she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. Neither of them saw the stills photographer get the shot.

Along the river road by the White Hart at Barnes several police cars were parked up on the pavement. A small group of people had gathered near the base of the rail bridge, hoping to discover the cause for the police activity on the towpath.

The rowing coach cycling from the direction of Mortlake could see some sort of a hold-up in front. Police were waving him down.

He swore in irritation and skidded to a stop. Through gaps in the small crowd he could see that white posts had been set up connected by fluttering blue and white plastic tape.

'Sorry, sir,' one of the constables said. 'You'll have to go back and get up onto the road.'

The man on the bicycle sat straddling the saddle. 'An accident?' He was staring along the footpath.

'A kind of accident, sir. We're not letting anyone through.' The coach watched his school eight pulling away beyond Barnes Bridge 'Whatever it is,' he said testily, dragging his bicycle round to point up towards the road, 'I hope it's

important enough to ruin a perfectly good morning's rowing practice.'

Claire's BMW picked up speed on the A3.

'No further news of Corby?' Kate asked.

Claire shook her head. 'Pictures of her in most of the papers this morning.'

'And at midday. She's bound to see one of them,' Kate said.

'Unless she's in Paris.'

'I just pray she is,' Kate said. 'Staying with friends.'

Claire nodded. 'I'm still convinced of it. If not with friends, with one friend. We'll get a call, I'm sure of it.'

They drove on in silence, Kate thinking about Corby, Claire wondering how she could bring herself to say what was on her mind, more than on her mind, an idea that had been besieging her for the last couple of hours. She had arrived home from Kate's house, taken off her tracksuit and showered and dressed in jeans, a cheerful yellow sweater and loafers, and arranged to meet Steven for lunch. Then spoken to Tom and told him she was certain Corby was in Paris. Almost persuaded him. Then started thinking again about Katie. Feeling uneasy about Katie. She had looked at her watch and decided there was enough time to offer to take her to the airport.

That much had been easy; what was coming was the hard part.

'This is really good of you,' Kate said after a few moments' silence. 'I shouldn't have accepted with all you've got on your mind.'

Claire shrugged, her eyes on the road. 'I should have offered when you first said you were flying to Edinburgh

Glad I thought of it. Gives us time to talk.'

'We were talking all morning,' Kate said, glancing at her.

Claire grunted, concentrating on the traffic, concentrating on trying to line up her thoughts in a coherent manner. After a series of hold-ups on the Kingston by-pass they were now clear of the heavily built-up areas and were driving south towards Gatwick Airport. 'One of the really devastating things about finding your husband in bed with another woman,' Claire said slowly, 'and maybe it's the most important thing, is that suddenly you no longer know him in the same way. He's the overnight stranger.'

Kate nodded. 'I can see that,' she said.

'It's a matter of face value,' Claire pressed on. 'Before something like this happens you take everything at face value. Afterwards you take nothing on trust, however trivial.'

Kate said nothing.

'You're thinking how many times have you heard these mutterings before?'

'I've heard them some. Or something similar.'

'I'm sure you have.' Claire paused. 'I've never really asked you, Katie,' she said after a moment or two. 'What do you think of Tom?'

Kate sat up in her seat. 'What do I think of Tom? Kind of a funny question after all these years.'

'I mean if he walked into your office one day, a stranger?'

'A tall, good-looking guy in a business suit, is what I'd think.'

'Just that?'

'What else?'

'Okay,' Claire said. 'Another scenario. He's a stranger at a party. He comes on very strong to you and asks you to go to bed with him.'

'It's a crazy question.' Kate's tone was curt. 'You don't ask your friends questions like that.'

Claire glanced at her quickly and saw that a bright flush had touched her cheek. She drove on for a while in silence. 'I was just trying to get some sort of outside look at him,' Claire said. 'I was such a kid when we married.'

'A twenty-seven-year-old kid.'

'There was still a lot I didn't know. Still don't. I don't even know if he's what I'd loosely think of as my type of man any more.'

'Isn't it a little late to be asking yourself that particular question?'

'That's why I asked you whether you'd go to bed with him.'

Kate was angry. 'You wouldn't thank me whatever I said. It's a damn silly question, Claire. Now for God's sake drop it.'

Claire looked at her closely and shrugged. 'Maybe you're right.'

They drove on through the Surrey woods in silence. But that one glimpse of Kate's burning cheek, no more than a fraction of a second, stayed in Claire's mind. Kate, cool and controlled, was the friend Claire was used to. Kate agitated, uncertain how to react, was something else. She had been like that when Claire had first told her the story of walking in on Tom. As if, the thought recurred, she might already have known. Of course, it was possible that Tom told her while she herself was in Moscow. But in that case why had Kate said nothing?

She brooded on this for a few more minutes until she was aware of Kate looking at her watch. 'We're okay for time,' Claire said. 'Another fifteen minutes'll see us there.'

'Speed it up a little, all the same,' Kate said. 'We lost more time than I realised back there.'

'We'll be okay,' Claire said. But she put her foot down, taking the long sweeps of the road at a slightly faster speed. Why had she asked Kate that schoolgirl question about meeting Tom at a party? A question like that could put anybody on their guard. She had always accepted, of course, that Kate had never entirely got over Tom. She didn't really disguise it. 'Always remember I saw him first,' she'd say, as if that conferred certain rights of candour. And it was true enough that Kate had seen him first. But there had been a little more to it than that.

When Claire had first met Tom, he and Kate had been a couple. They went to parties together. They went skiing together. She the bright Irish postgraduate student, he the front runner of his State Department group. Three weeks after they met it was Claire whom Tom next asked for a weekend skiing. Kate had been told and had taken it in silence. Ten days later he had asked Claire to marry him.

She remembered that phone call from Tom a couple of days after Christmas. The call itself wasn't entirely a surprise but the way he'd handled it was not the way she expected.

'Kate said nothing about skiing this weekend,' Claire had said carefully.

'I'm asking you. Not Kate. In case you're wondering, I just called her. She knows I'm about to call you.'

'Ouch.'

'So, do we ski?'

It had not been an easy question for Claire. But Midas had already been making enquiries. Tom Garrison was star-rated. A very suitable man for his daughter. Claire had said yes.

Claire and Kate had stayed talking. It had rocked their friendship, of course. It was bound to. But they had stumbled back onto best-friend terms over the next two years. Always with a faintly guarded element on the Irish girl's side, as if she wasn't prepared to let Claire come that close again On the surface she'd kept smiling like the good friend she was. And had never acted as anything but a good friend of them both.

Until perhaps now.

By the time they arrived at Gatwick, Kate and Claire had not spoken for several minutes. Parking the car, unloading and checking the bags, provided physical activity to disguise the discomfort between them. But it was there.

They stood in front of the monitor and checked Kate's flight time and then walked slowly towards the boarding gate. A strong feeling was welling up in Claire, a surge of simple suspicion that she had to satisfy. 'We've got time for coffee,' she said.

Kate shook her head. 'Not for me.'

Claire took her by the arm and swung her gently round so that they faced each other. 'This is not the sophomore scenario,' she said.

Kate's eyes flickered then steadied.

'You know what I'm talking about.' Claire made it more a statement than a question.

Kate shook her head.

'I'm asking you, Katie. Did Tom make a pass at you? Recently, I mean?'

'I don't like these questions, Claire.'

'Did he?'

Kate turned away. 'Just give it up, Claire . .'

Claire moved alongside her. 'It's time for the dumb

question, Kate. Except this time it's me asking you.'

'You're not asking if I'm in love with Tom?' Kate said angrily.

'Yes.'

Kate stood, her eyes level with Claire's, her cheeks flushed. 'Okay,' she said. 'I've always felt a little bit more than friendship for Tom. That's the truth, as you've known it to be since the day you met him. But after that New York Christmas party he called you and not me to go skiing. I didn't disguise what I felt then. I said to myself, unfortunately it's a free country.' She turned to the loudspeaker as her flight was called. 'What else do you want to know?' she asked over her shoulder.

Claire's look was glacial. 'I want to know: are you sleeping with him, Katie?'

Kate turned slowly back until they were facing each other. 'You mean was it me you saw in bed with him on Sunday night?'

Claire swallowed hard, unsure of her ground, but determined. 'That's what I mean,' she said slowly. 'I'm not sure why, but I've come to doubt the story of Joyce Hartmann paying Tom that visit. But that's the way it is.' She took a deep breath. 'I don't believe it was Joyce Hartmann.'

The loudspeaker system was calling Kate's flight.

'I'd like to leave this until I'm back in London,' Kate said. 'It's a whole lot more complicated than you imagine.'

'I just want an answer, Kate. I don't want any complications. Was that really Joyce Hartmann I saw in bed with Tom? Or was it you?'

Kate stood, white-faced.

'Well?'

'I do have something to tell you, Claire,' she said heavily.

'You've been having Tom on your couch since last Halloween. Or longer.'

Kate hesitated 'I've had him on my couch, yes,' she said slowly 'But the relationship has been strictly doctor/patient.'

'What? What the hell are you saying?'

'Tom's my patient, Claire He has been for the last several months.'

Claire stared at her blankly People moving benind Kate back and forth across the concourse were barely in focus Tom had gone to Kate for therapy? She struggled to put it into words. 'What did Tom need to come to you for? Problems with his drinking? Is that what you're telling me, because if you are I just don't damn well believe it.'

'The drinking too.'

'What else, then, for Christ's sake?'

'You know I can't discuss that.'

'What in God's name are you saying, Kate?'

'I'm saying all I can say Tom came to me at the beginning of this year with certain problems Perhaps unwisely, I agreed to accept him as a patient.'

The Edinburgh flight was called again.

'Perhaps unwisely? What does that mean?'

'I must go,' Kate said. 'I'm sorry, Claire We'll talk When I get back, we'll talk.'

Claire watched her long strides across the marbled floor

Certain problems . . She gritted her teeth as she watched Kate move quickly away You bet we'll talk.

Arriving home, Claire walked through the house and into the garden, ignoring the sounds of Tom in the kitchen At this time of the year the small London garden was thick with shrubs The yellow gaudiness of the California freemontia

hung around her head as she stood immobile in the shade. Her fury accelerated her heartbeat until it seemed to thump like a drum in her temples.

Through the french doors, Tom walked into the garden, a drink in his hand. 'No news from the police,' he said. 'I suppose that's a good sign. Maybe, like one or two of the girls said, she has taken off for Paris after all. My God, wouldn't that be marvellous.' He waved his glass. 'Something I can get you?'

'No.' She paused. 'Something you can tell me.'

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing. 'Okay.'

There was no point in ceremony, introduction. 'I know that wasn't Joyce Hartmann in bed with you,' she said.

The hand holding the glass dropped to his side. The contents poured slowly onto the grass.

A dozen images seemed to flit through Claire's mind, of the tall Irish girl standing with Tom in the corner of a party, of her delighted laughter as she opened a Christmas present of a book Tom had chosen for her, of her playing tennis with Tom in Boston or Surrey or the South of France. And the last image of the tangled bedclothes and the thrashing legs.

'It wasn't Joyce, was it?'

He stared at her.

'It wasn't Joyce Hartmann, was it?'

His face looked grey with guilt. 'It wasn't Joyce, no.' His voice was affected, his throat full of mucus.

'It was Katie, wasn't it.'

He lifted his head slowly. 'Kate told you?'

Inside the house the phone rang.

10

The BMW swept across the Barnes Common intersection and headed towards the village. Abbeline had explained to her that he was going to be housed not in the regular Barnes police station by the river but in the forbidding dark red brick station that now accommodated specialist groups. She had no difficulty finding the building. She and Tom had friends in Barnes and they had driven this way a dozen times. Behind the new red brick police station Steven Ross was waiting for her in the car park beside a line of white police vans. She got out of the car and walked quickly to meet him. 'Thanks for coming,' she said, reaching out to hold both his hands. 'Tom answered the phone. When he heard the word *identify*, he collapsed. He couldn't speak I told him they hadn't found Corby yet, but he refused to come.'

'Do you want to go straight in?'

She nodded and they walked up the steps and through the entrance. A policewoman who had been waiting on a bench in the hall got up immediately.

'Dr Garrison?'

Claire nodded.

'And Mr Garrison?'

'I'm Steven Ross. A friend.'

The policewoman led them down a corridor to where Jack Abbeline was waiting. He introduced himself to Steven Ross

and shook hands with both of them. 'Mr Garrison's not with you,' he said.

'He felt he wasn't up to it.' Claire tried to look past him into the room but the door was only part open.

Abbeline nodded. 'I want to say straightaway that all we've got are the words "light-coloured miniskirt" picked up on the police computer. We have no other reason to think that anything here belongs to Corby.'

Claire nodded. 'But if it does?'

'We'll talk about that afterwards. Would you like to come in?' He led the way into a bare windowless room with a metal trestle table in the middle. Spread out on the table was a short, cream skirt, patched with dry mud, a pair of embroidered white briefs placed face down, and a blue shoe.

Claire closed her eyes briefly. The simple arrangement of clothing on the metal table made a lump rise in her gorge.

'I'd like you to take a look at the items here, Dr Garrison. I'm sure if they don't belong to Corby you'll be able to eliminate them very quickly. From our point of view there's nothing hard and fast. No name or initial.'

She swallowed hard. She was looking at the skirt. An expensive cream material. One patch pocket on the hip. 'The make of the skirt?' she asked in a low voice.

'The label says "Lost Innocence",' Abbeline said, turning over the waistband. 'A Knightsbridge address.'

Claire was silent. The two men saw that the colour had seeped from her face. She herself knew only that her ears were buzzing strangely. Steven Ross moved closer to her. 'Are you all right?' he said, ready to take her weight.

She straightened up and nodded. The movement cleared her head. 'Lost Innocence,' she said, her voice sounding strangely hoarse even to herself. 'She bought a skirt there

recently. Same colour. The shoe is a Charles Jourdan.'

Abbeline nodded. 'It is. Correct.' He paused. 'I'm afraid,' he said carefully, 'we have to assume the worst.'

'Found by the river, you said. You're not suggesting she threw herself in?'

'No.' He paused. 'Do you want to sit down, Dr Garrison?' He had seen the shudder that passed through her with the realisation that she was being told that Corby had been murdered.

Steven Ross put his hand on her shoulder. She turned and smiled briefly at him. 'No,' she said to Abbeline. 'I'm all right. I won't pretend. I wasn't particularly attached to Corby. But this is a pretty bad shock all the same.' She hesitated. 'I don't believe for a moment she killed herself, of course But I'd like to ask why you're so certain.'

Abbeline moved over to the table. As Claire and Steven Ross watched him he turned over the skirt. The rust-coloured stain around the centre of the material was familiar to Claire as blood. But she was stunned to see that the cloth had been sliced through.

She reeled back a step and Ross held her.

Abbeline turned over the white briefs. They too had been severed from crotch to waistband.

'A knife,' Claire said. Her voice had dried up. She made an upward movement of her hand.

'Just so,' Jack Abbeline said. 'So it must have been.'

Claire and Steven Ross had gone ahead in Claire's car. Abbeline and Inspector George Briden were just leaving to go down to Barnes River Police when the phone rang. 'It's a Miss Jo Saunders for you, sir,' Briden said, passing the phone to Abbeline.

'I can't talk now, Jo,' Abbeline shifted the phone into his other hand, delaying until Briden had left the office.

On the other end of the line, Jo's voice sounded worried. 'I know, Jack – but you should know about this. The unit photographer put out some pictures this afternoon. One of them is of you and me. A journalist just called me asking about my relationship with the man who's investigating the missing American teenager.'

'Christ. Something we don't need just now. Are they using the picture?'

'Almost certainly. I'm planting a big smacker, full on your lips.'

He grunted. 'Okay, Jo,' he said. 'As long as you don't mention one word about the investigation. Certainly nothing about finding the clothes yet.'

Jo had heard it in his voice before. 'They were her clothes.'

'We've just got an identification.'

'I'm sorry, Jack.'

'Yuh. Do what you can with the press. I'll call you when I can, Jo.'

At the Thames Division headquarters on the Barnes riverfront Claire and Steven Ross were shown up to an operations room overlooking the river and introduced to Sergeant Barnard of the river police. Abbeline had not yet arrived and they stood around for a few minutes listening to Barnard talking about his job. A balding man in his late forties, he was too enthused by the nature of his work to be oversensitive to any distress his love of detail might cause. He had managed to include accounts of three bodies found that month in the river before they heard Abbeline's voice downstairs.

'I'd like you to tell Dr Garrison,' Abbeline said as he

joined them in the room with a wall-long map of the Thames from Teddington to the sea, 'what you think might have happened to a body in the water at the point we found the clothing.'

In the Victorian room with its white-painted cast-iron roof supports and its long Gothic windows overlooking the grey river, Claire could almost smell the oily water as it heaved lazily against the embankment wall at high tide below her.

'All yours, Barnard,' Abbeline said.

Sergeant Barnard squared his shoulders to the task. It was a story he had told many times before but one he liked telling. 'Very well, sir.' He turned to Claire. 'We're working on the assumption, of course, that the body was introduced into the water at the place the clothing was found. That's assumption number one.'

'Why think anything else? It sounds a reasonable assumption,' Claire said softly.

'Perhaps,' Barnard said. 'Perhaps not. Either way it's an assumption. No more.'

Claire shrugged agreement. She found herself suddenly appreciating the fact that, in her dealings with him, Abbeline seemed entirely free from this particular type of pedantry. Barnard was waiting for her confirmation. 'An assumption, no more,' she echoed.

'Second assumption,' Barnard said, 'is that the body was introduced to the water from the bank.'

'How else?'

'From a boat. Hurled from the railway bridge a few yards away.'

'All right,' Claire said, glad that Tom was not there. 'Two assumptions.'

Barnard was satisfied he had cleared the ground

'Basically,' he said, 'a human body that's dead on contact with the water or dies very shortly afterwards sinks after a very few minutes. Factors like the nature of the clothing and the temperature of the water affect the length of time the body floats. But in terms of recovering it, that's only a matter of at most a hundred yards upstream or down in a tidal river. The second stage is more important. The body sinks. If it's snagged by anything on the bottom there's no knowing how long it could stay down.'

'And if it isn't snagged?' Abbeline said.

'Then the time it remains on the bottom depends on three factors. How long ago a meal had been eaten, the water temperature, and what we call the incidental buoyancy of the clothing.'

'The water temperature is presumably high at the moment,' Steven Ross said.

'Unusually high, even for a summer month. But the buoyancy of the clothing that appears to have remained on the body is virtually nil. We may be lucky here with a short jacket or something of the sort. Is that possible, Dr Garrison.'

'She had several such jackets, yes.'

'Then air pockets could form at the armpits or around the shoulders. Nevertheless the main activating factor in buoyancy at this stage is the gases building up in the stomach.'

'When do you expect she'll be found?' Claire asked. Somehow she had distanced herself. It was as if they were discussing the death of a stranger.

'There's no guarantee she will be found, I think we have to be quite clear about that,' Barnard said. 'Most bodies, as far as we're able to know, are found unless someone intended

them not to be. Tied something heavy to the ankle, for instance . . .'

Claire drew her breath in slowly. 'I'd never thought of that, of course.'

'What Sergeant Barnard's saying,' Abbeline intervened, 'is that you and your husband shouldn't be waiting day after day. Given the water temperature, she should have been visible on the surface already if she was put into the river Sunday night/Monday morning during the early hours.'

'Could she be drawn out to sea?' Claire asked.

'Thames undercurrents are powerful,' Barnard said, 'and you have to recognise the possibility. Some bodies float right out to sea. But it's a long way down-river from here. No, I would have expected a sighting by now, Nine Elms most likely, but even as far down as Tower Bridge. The fact we haven't had one suggests to me the possibility she's been snagged on the bottom.'

'You mean she might never be found?' Claire asked.

'In this case, Doctor,' Barnard said, 'I think that's what the smart money would be on.'

They left the riverfront headquarters and Abbeline asked Claire to come back to the main station. 'I've just one more thing to ask you about,' he said, getting into his car.

Claire drove the BMW slowly back through Barnes. 'What do you think,' she said to Steven Ross. 'Are they telling us there's no chance of finding her? That's what the smart money would be on. Is that what he meant?'

'That's how I understood it,' he said. 'Maybe, from Tom's point of view, that's the better way.'

'I can't imagine how he's going to take it.' She shook her head.

'Do you want me to be around when you tell him?'

She pulled the car up beside the blue lamp marked 'Police'. 'It would certainly help me,' she said wanly, 'but I don't think anything is going to do Tom much good.' She switched off the engine.

'You look pretty pale,' he said.

She turned to face him. 'I'm terrified of whatever it is the Superintendent wants to see me about. They always leave the worst till last, don't they?'

He leaned over and gave her a brief hug. 'Let's go and see,' he said.

They stood around the metal table in the windowless room, Claire opposite Abbeline, Steven Ross slightly back from the table from which Corby's clothing had been removed, the WPC beside him on the other side of the doorway.

'It's two or three questions in fact,' Abbeline said.

'Go ahead.'

'I should have asked for the school medical records, but perhaps you can help me. Do you know Corby's blood group?'

'Group O,' Claire said. 'And the blood on the skirt?'

'Group O,' Abbeline said. 'Not conclusive but there are more than enough other elements.'

'More than enough,' Claire said. 'It's too soon for you to have any idea where she was that night, I suppose.'

'I've absolutely no lead on the man we presume killed her, if that's what you mean.'

'Yes, that's what I mean,' Claire said.

'We go about these things step by step,' Abbeline said. 'What do we know? That on Sunday night she was last seen by schoolfriends. Perhaps around about nine o'clock she left the school at Windsor. The next we know of her is based on

an assumption, as Sergeant Barnard would have reminded us. But I think it's one we'll make. Her next known position was on the riverbank at Barnes. Dead or alive, we don't know. So we ask ourselves how she moved between Windsor and Barnes, a distance of roughly twenty-eight miles, on that Sunday night.'

'No answers,' Claire said.

'We have boards up on the motorway asking drivers for help if they were using the road that Sunday night.'

'You think she hitch-hiked?' Steven Ross asked.

Abbeline nodded. 'We have two reports from drivers of a girl in a light miniskirt hitching on or about the Windsor turn-off. I think we'll find it was Corby.'

Images rushed unbidden into Claire's mind. She felt her whole body quiver. 'You believe she was killed by the man who gave her a lift.'

'It's a lot too soon to say that,' Abbeline said.

'He hasn't come forward. That must mean something.'

Abbeline shook his head. 'In a murder enquiry like this, involving a young woman, key witnesses don't always want to rush forward. No married man's going to be happy about his wife knowing he picked up a seventeen-year-old in a miniskirt.'

'I see.' Claire stood shaking her head. 'So if not the driver, who? The mysterious boyfriend.'

'We're still looking for him. Can I get you some coffee?'

'No thanks.' She shook her head. 'I must get back as soon as possible. I have to tell my husband what has happened.'

Abbeline nodded. 'We found another item of clothing on the riverbank,' he said. 'Some yards from the others but certainly belonging to Corby.' He nodded to the policewoman and she lifted a large grey cardboard folder which had been

resting against the wall behind her. Placing it on the table before Claire, she opened it up. A black silk shirt was pinned to the cardboard. Claire saw immediately the discoloured patches on the front.

'It was found rolled up in the bushes close to where the other items were found. Do you recognise it as Corby's?'

'May I touch it?' she asked.

Abbeline inclined his head.

She ran the back of her fingers across the collar. 'Silk.'

'Expensive?'

'Quite. I guess.'

'Have you seen it before?'

'No. I can ask Tom if he bought her anything like that. But I'm pretty sure he didn't. During her half-term he was in the States. Came back with a whole bagful of presents, for both of us. But no black shirt. If he had given it to her I don't see any reason to hide it from me. It's not that expensive.'

'You think it's a recent acquisition?'

'Perhaps.' She hesitated, thinking. 'Yes, I do. I've never seen it before. Perhaps she bought it herself, but I doubt she had the money. Perhaps it was a swop with one of her friends. Perhaps it means the mysterious man friend is flesh and blood, after all.'

She regretted the phrase immediately but Abbeline's expression didn't change. 'However she acquired it, it seems to have some significance,' he said slowly. 'It's possible the murderer was taking it with him. Dropped it as he climbed the bank.'

The murderer. Claire had never realised before how slowly, step by step, the imagination absorbs something like this. Corby is missing. Corby is killed. Corby has a murderer.

A flesh and blood man who drops things on a riverbank at night.

'My last question,' Abbeline said, 'is about money. Did Corby get an allowance?'

'Officially, yes. But she was always being given the odd fifty pounds for something she just had to have.'

'We can see by the quality of her clothes that she spent a lot. We'll have to have her bank statement, of course, but could I ask you to guess, Dr Garrison? If I had it before me now, how much would there be in it?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. Last month my husband paid off Corby's overdraft and the bank closed her account. They also withdrew her credit card.'

Abbeline was looking down thoughtfully at the blank surface of the table. A fly buzzed on the inside of the window. 'There is a pocket in Corby's miniskirt,' he said slowly, 'not for carrying a bunch of keys or anything, that obviously would have disturbed the line. But a pocket for carrying something small and flat, like a credit card perhaps.'

'I told you, Superintendent . . .'

'There was no credit card in the pocket.' He drew from his inside pocket a plastic envelope, stiff and opaque, and placed it on the table. 'There was, however, this.' He leaned over the table and lifted the flap of the envelope. Inserting his fingers he withdrew a fold of US Treasury bills. 'Three one-hundred-dollar bills,' he said. He paused, lifting his head, looking up at her. 'In view of the fact that the bank had withdrawn her credit card and closed her account, aren't you surprised she should be carrying three hundred dollars?'

Three hundred dollars.

Claire nodded dumbly.

11

He drove. She wasn't able to. The shock when Abbeline had told her about the money had been like a violent physical blow to her face . . . Three hundred dollars.

They crossed Hammersmith Bridge in silence. Along the Fulham Palace Road she said, slumped in her seat: 'I was wrong, of course. Completely wrong. I assumed the money had been stolen from my room in Moscow.'

He nodded and swung the blue BMW into the King's Road. 'How were you to guess?' he said. 'It just wasn't possible.'

'I couldn't tell Abbeline what Corby having that sum of money meant, what three hundred dollars meant,' she said. She was inhaling deeply, trying to control her breathing. 'I couldn't tell him without seeing Tom first. I suppose I should have done. Maybe I just needed to be the one who confronted Tom with it. I don't know.'

He moved the car skilfully through the afternoon traffic. 'Times like this,' he said, 'you do what you feel's right. There are no rules.'

'No,' she echoed, 'no rules. No rules to play by.' She sat for a moment in a frozen silence. 'Oh my God,' she said, bursting into tears.

He drove on without speaking. In less than ten minutes he had pulled to a halt outside the house in Old Church Street

He turned to her. 'Don't get out yet.' He put his hand on hers. 'I want you to know I'm here to do what you want,' he said. 'Just that.'

She sat upright in the seat and dried her eyes. 'Tom's in,' she said. 'That's his car.'

'I can come in with you. Or I can wait out here. For as long as you like.'

She shook her head decisively, her hair flying as he had once seen it fly close to the candle flame in a Moscow restaurant. 'I'll do it,' she said. 'I must do it. Don't wait.'

He got out of the car and came round it to stand beside her She hesitated for a moment then pressed his hand.

'I'll phone you in an hour, then,' he said, handing her her keys.

'Please.' She was about to move away but she turned back to him. 'I don't want to jump any guns,' she said, 'but thank God for Moscow. Thank God I met you.' She squeezed his hand again quickly and turned to run up to the front door.

Letting herself in, she walked across the hall and into the living-room. Emotions swirled through her too fast for her to identify. Tom was sitting on the sofa, his head down, a tumbler of brandy on the carpet between his feet. He lifted his head slowly. His face was grey. The two lines that ran down his narrow cheeks were accentuated by shadow. 'It was Corby,' he said. 'Otherwise you would have phoned.' He held her eyes for a moment, but the effort was too much and he dropped his head again.

Anger erupted in her. Before she knew it the brandy bottle was in her hand. Within an inch of hurling it at the wall, she stopped and turned away. Slowly, deliberately, she put the bottle down and walked over to a chair and sat opposite him.

She knew she had to force some order on what happened next between them.

'They were Corby's clothes,' she told him. 'Her skirt and a few other things. The police believe she's dead.'

He seemed not to react, as if he hadn't heard. He was breathing strangely, almost as if he were in a drunken sleep.

'They think she was killed,' Claire said, 'and her body thrown in the river at Barnes.'

A choking sound came from him. Very slowly he lifted his head. There were no tears in his eyes but his face was crumpled as if he had kneaded the flesh of his cheeks. He seemed to her infinitely old. A stranger.

She looked away. Looked at the picture of old General Pemberton standing before the harsh granite of Hammermount House. Saw the unflinching Puritan hardness in his eyes, perfectly caught by the painter. Felt some of that flintiness come into her.

She watched him stand. 'I'm going to bed,' he said tonelessly.

Anger surged from her. 'You're not, Tom. You're certainly not. You're not running out on me now.'

She was surprised at the whiplash effect of her voice. He stepped back, looking down at her with that crumpled, kneaded look.

'I think I know why you were going to Kate for treatment,' she said.

He sat back on the sofa, his head in his hands. 'Do we have to . . . do we have to now . . . ?'

'You know we do.' She glanced up again at Pemberton, the long locks and the supercilious sneer. Was she feeling calm now, or dangerously cold? She turned her gaze back

on her husband. She wondered how much he could read in her face.

He was looking at her, breathing slowly but hoarsely. Sweat beaded his hairline.

'There was a pocket in Corby's skirt,' she said slowly. 'It had money in it. Three hundred dollars in it. Three one-hundred-dollar bills, Tom.'

'So?' It was a grunt of irritation at her irrelevance.

'My three hundred dollars. The three hundred dollars that I thought was stolen in Moscow.'

He said nothing. Elbows on his knees, face in his hands now, he appeared to be nodding. Or perhaps shaking. 'I don't understand,' he mumbled.

'You'd better begin to. Because the money was stolen before I ever got to Moscow. It was stolen by Corby from my case in this house. It was stolen by Corby when she came here on Sunday night.'

His whole body was shaking now.

'She was here on Sunday night, wasn't she, Tom? On Sunday night she was in this house!'

He said nothing, his head hanging.

Claire's voice rose. 'It wasn't Joyce Hartmann. It wasn't Katie either, was it? It was Corby in bed with you that night, wasn't it, Tom?'

His lips pursed. A slow, wincing agreement.

They sat in silence.

'That's what you were seeing Katie about.'

'Yes,' he said. His voice was thick and indistinct.

'You're going to tell me.'

'I can't . . .'

'For Christ's sake, you owe it to me!'

'I talked to Kate,' he said desperately. 'I can't talk to you.'

'You're going to have to.'

His arms threshed the air. Long arms, uncoordinated. His mouth hung open.

'You're going to tell me,' she said, and she could hear the hiss in her words.

He was nodding slowly. 'Kate knew something was wrong. It's her profession. She saw things.'

'What kind of things?'

'God knows, signs that meant something to her She asked me about Corby.' He was stuttering out the words. 'I told her how I was feeling . . . about feelings . . .'

'Go on.'

'About feelings that I'd been having for a long time. Jealousy, terrible jealousy whenever Corby talked about men. Boyfriends. Jealousy and the urge to protect her . . .'

'Protect her.'

'From anybody else.'

'Did you tell Kate you'd started sleeping with her?'

He shook his head wildly, tears in his eyes. 'I hadn't. I hadn't.'

'It hadn't happened before?'

He looked at her, a flinching glance, totally cowed. She couldn't believe this was the husband who had figured in innumerable scenes in her life as a confident, self-possessed man.

'Nothing really happened until Sunday night,' he said in a whisper. 'It was getting worse, though. I went to see Kate again. Professionally. I thought she was the only one who knew enough about us all to understand.'

'And did she understand?' Claire said bitterly.

'She wanted me to go to someone else. Some professor. But I refused. I forced Kate to listen to me '

'Now tell me.'

He sat, his eyes on her, his hand rubbing back and forth along the arm of the sofa.

'I want to know, Tom. However much it sickens me, I want to know.'

'Sickens you?' The words were barely short of a snarl. He straightened his shoulders. His head came up. 'You don't begin to understand,' he said in a voice she suddenly recognised again, a voice he might use if he were talking about some embassy matter. 'You don't begin to understand the burden I've been carrying. Alone, Claire. Guilt at the way the family let her down. Guilt at the way my father let her down . . . Guilt at the way Adam just walked out of her life.'

'Is that what Kate said?'

'That's what I understood her to say.' He looked at her with raised eyebrows, asking for her agreement.

She shook her head slowly. 'I want to know, Tom.'

He got up and poured himself another drink. 'The first time anything happened,' he said, 'you were staying on the island with Midas.'

'When was this?

He was silent.

'This year?'

'Last year,' he said.

'You bastard.'

'Corby came home for the weekend. You weren't here. Everything was different. We bought in hamburgers which you'd never have in the house. Packets of French fries. Corby had some dope with her. We smoked that. Drank a few rum and Cokes. We laughed a lot. Talked a lot.'

'About me?'

'Yes. It was amazing how much she understood.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'I mean she understood it was tough for you too. She even admitted that sometimes she made it tough deliberately. She admitted that.'

'Get on with it.'

'It was getting late. We were still talking, laughing. Then Corby found some more dope. We smoked that and Corby turned up the music. You know, right up.'

'The way I can't stand it,' Claire said. 'I know.'

'And we started dancing around and I just felt great, you know, guilty but great. Can you understand that?'

'No.'

Her tone brought him down to earth. 'No, I guess not. I guess you can't.'

'What happened?'

He shook his head. 'I can't tell you.'

'What happened?' Her voice rose.

'We were sitting on the sofa.' He hesitated. 'She touched me. In fun.'

'She jerked you off.'

'No,' he said hoarsely. How could he tell Claire that Corby had asked him for money as she always did. But this time with her hand resting on his crotch. And with her hand there he couldn't say yes. Found it impossible. He knew what she was doing but he did not ask her to take her hand away Instead he had become angry, angry because she had broken the magic spell of the evening. And he had accused her of playing games for the money she wanted. That's how he had put it, playing games.

She had burst into tears of anger and run upstairs to bed. And he had sat miserably, pouring himself another large

Scotch, wondering what the hell had happened to a magical evening, wondering how it could have been repaired.

He had tried to go up to her but she had locked herself in. The sound of her sobbing had cut through him. In his own room he had lain in bed, the door open, listening until the sounds stopped Even then the torture had endured, the pain he felt when he contemplated her loneliness.

Finally, helped by drink, he had dropped off, to awaken some time later. Corby, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling, was in the bed beside him. 'Sorry, Tom,' she said in that voice that reminded him more of the child in her than the young woman. 'I'm really sorry, Tom.'

The relief that flooded him was indescribable. The gratitude he felt that she should release him from the bonds of guilt. He took her in his arms and hugged her and she hugged him back.

They had fallen asleep like that; and as morning broke had moved towards wakefulness wrapped tightly around each other. Perhaps each knew the other was pretending a deeper level of sleep. Eyes closed, they had moved and grunted and squirmed sleepily until a moment when he was balanced, half lying between her legs, and she had reached up and held him and pulled him gently down on her.

He had not penetrated her, but they had lain there, murmuring to each other like lovers.

How could he explain to Claire, his wife, that that first time was the most exciting moment of his life? How could he explain those feelings to Claire? Explain that he felt no guilt, even afterwards when he thought about it. Explain that, after what had happened that first night, the very core of himself, all wishes, pleasures, desires, seemed to move around Corby in a slow dance, a gavotte, infinitely

exciting to him, but infinitely frightening too, because the knowledge was there that, at some time, the moment would come.

Claire had seen nothing. Claire had only her furious jealousy of Corby, not as a woman, but as a spoilt child But, looking in from the edges, Katie had seen the dance. Katie had guessed. Katie had insisted he talk about it.

He was looking at Claire, at the coldness in her face, and he wanted to explain. But he knew it was impossible. Say something, then. Anything.

As he struggled for words, she saw he was incapable of speech. She took a deep breath. 'Okay,' she said. 'No more details.'

'No more details,' he repeated dully. He made to stand up but the fierceness of her look made him subside into the sofa.

'That night,' Claire said slowly, as if she were talking to a child, 'Sunday night. When I came home, while I was sobbing in the bathroom, you took Corby downstairs.'

'I hailed a cab for her,' he said. 'I gave her money to take a hotel room for the night.'

'That's what you did.'

'That's what I did. You know that.'

'I was in the shower,' she reminded him flatly. 'After that I went to my office for the night. How do I know anything?'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying the police are going to ask if you can prove she did leave in a taxi that night.'

'Prove? Prove? You know I can't.'

'The police are going to ask you,' Claire said coldly and deliberately.

'What in God's name . . . What in God's name are you talking about?'

'You know what I'm talking about.' She barely kept the scream out of her voice. 'You're going to have to prove that Corby did what you've just told me she did. That she left here on Sunday night as you say she did.' Why was she saying these things? Her head was thudding with anger and fear, fear for what might have happened. 'You're going to have to prove,' she said, reckless to hurt him, 'that Corby didn't do the obvious thing, run into her own bedroom . . . lock herself in . . . wait there until I'd gone.'

His head was up. 'Then what?'

'You tell me, Tom. Better still, tell the police.'

He came halfway out of his seat. 'You bitch,' he breathed. He stood up, more slowly. 'Claire, you bitch . . .'

'The police are going to ask you,' she repeated relentlessly. 'You must know that.'

His eyes were wild, the eyelids snapping like shutters. 'You unspeakable bitch!' His voice rose unsteadily. 'You're accusing me of killing her!'

After two hours of questions at Old Church Street, Jack Abbeline asked Tom Garrison to accompany him to Barnes to make a statement.

Claire drove alone behind the two police cars and parked behind the red-brick station in time to see Tom escorted from the police car. Watching him cross the parking lot she was aware that a remarkable change had come over her husband. She could see it in his manner, in the way he got out of the car, in the few words he exchanged with the driver, the companionable way he walked with Abbeline to the back door of the station. Sitting there in her own car, watching

him, she had the terrible feeling that a great weight had been taken from his mind.

She was still sitting in the car when a policewoman came out and crossed to where she was parked. She leaned down to Claire's open window. 'Mrs Garrison?'

'Yes.'

'Superintendent Abbeline asked me to ask you if there's anything I can do.'

'How long will my husband be?'

The young woman grimaced. 'It really isn't possible to say. It could be two or three hours.'

Claire looked up into her face. 'Or a lot longer.'

'I don't know the details. I can offer you tea here, or suggest you go home and try to get some sleep. I can go back with you, if you like.'

Claire shook her head. 'I'll stay here,' she said. 'I'll come in later for a cup of tea maybe.'

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

She watched the trim black skirt and white shirt pass under the lamps and disappear up the ramp into the station. Then she got out of her car. It was a misty night, but warm enough to walk. Claire took her green anorak from the back seat and, pulling it on, walked on past the station towards the village.

She checked her watch. It was close to three o'clock. The road was without traffic as she took the narrow pavement to Barnes Pond. She had vaguely had it in mind to sit on one of the benches beside the pond, but she found herself walking on, past the long dark windows of the Sun Inn, down the deserted, narrow high street to the river.

The mist here was thicker, gathered like low, thin cloud

above the river. She walked down onto the towpath and stood staring out across the water. The shape of the far bank was indistinct. Tiny heads of light glittered and were lost in the mist.

She walked further down the bank. She knew she was not far from the place where Corby's clothes had been found but it was still a shock to see, wrapped around a tree, a band of trailing blue and white plastic.

She knew immediately where she was.

There was a bench on the towpath. She sat down, hands deep in her jacket pockets, and looked down at the mud and gravel foreshore. The nape of her neck prickled and felt warm and sweaty. Had Corby died here? Or had she been dead when her murderer brought her here. Her murderer.

She thought, with a violent sense of shock, of the phone call to Midas, that Sunday night. '*Requiescat in pace*', he had intoned. But of course that was just his Russian mischievousness. At that moment Corby wasn't yet dead. At that moment Corby was upstairs, lying in Tom's arms.

But what had happened after that? When Claire had run into the bathroom and torn off her clothes and stood under the shower. Had Corby fled to her room? Had Tom reacted quickly, as she knew he was certainly capable of doing, when he realised she had not seen Corby's face, when he realised Claire did not know that the woman in bed with him was Corby? Had Tom then run downstairs and made a quick pretence of slamming doors in order to be able to announce that the woman had left, was bundled into a taxi, gone?

And when she, Claire, had decided to leave the house for a night of nightmares on the emergency cot in her office, what was happening at Old Church Street? A ferocious argument? Threats by Corby to expose him?

Was it possible? Was it possible, in the way a sober-seeming, rational man like Tom could lose his temper and blaze with a short uncontrollable Irish fury, was it possible he had killed her? Driven a knife into her and ripped high enough to sever the waistband of her skirt. Was that possible?

She sat, shivering, looking out through the river mist. The even flow of the outgoing tide left the surface of the river smooth, unruffled. Something plopped in the water a few yards further down the riverbank; leaves, barely moving in the still air, rattled against each other. Getting up, she walked down to the muddy strand and out the ten yards to the water's edge. She knew she was mad to be standing here, a woman alone at three in the morning, staring out into the river mist. But a sense of something she had never felt before, new thoughts, propelled her. And this place where Corby had last been seen by human eyes seemed more than anywhere the place for what she was thinking.

She had to face the possibility that it was Tom's eyes which had last looked down at Corby's face as he carried her to the water's edge. And if she faced that, she had to face the equal horror of the thought that this man she had lived with, and believed she'd known, was certain she'd known, was in fact a stranger.

And the further step that if Tom Garrison was a stranger, or perhaps more accurately a stranger dwelt within him, then were not all the people closest to her capable of disguising a stranger within them?

It was a train of thought she found shattering. A train of thought that didn't stop there. Because if we were all capable of harbouring the stranger, each and every one of us, the next question had to be: were we aware of his existence? Or was it possible that the ultimate terror was that we were all

obliged, some time, to face the sudden, unexpected presence of this stranger even in ourselves?

A footstep crunched on gravel behind her and she turned, her arms flailing A few yards above her a figure in a blue uniform skirt and white shirt stood on the bank. 'I'll walk you back to the station, Mrs Garrison,' the policewoman said. 'Mr Abbeline has just told me there's no point in your waiting. Let's have a cup of tea together, then I think you should be getting home.'

12

She had folded back the top of the BMW and in bright morning sunshine they drove straight from Heathrow to Barnes. 'How much do the police know?' had been Adam Garrison's first question. A lawyer's question, Claire thought, heading her car across Hammersmith Bridge.

'They know that Corby came to the house on Sunday night, of course.'

'Nothing more?'

'Yes,' she said. 'They know Tom was in bed with Corby that night.'

'Jesus, you told them that?'

'Doesn't it mean anything to you, what he did?' she asked angrily.

'It means something,' he said tightly. 'But what has to matter most at the moment is that he doesn't get accused of what he didn't do.'

She was coldly silent.

'For Christ's sake, you don't believe Tom killed her?' he said.

'For Christ's sake, I didn't believe Tom had slept with her.' Her voice rose. 'What do I know about what happened after that? A week ago I had an idea of a husband who was Mr Clean himself. Now what I see I don't like and I don't know how far it goes.'

'Okay.' His face set.

'More than that, I'm not going to be suckered into believing the best of him. Especially when there doesn't seem any pressing reason to. So don't say to me: For Christ's sake, you don't believe Tom killed her? The answer is I don't know, Adam.'

'Okay, Claire,' he said more slowly. 'We'll get nowhere like this. Let's just agree on what we're doing.'

'What are we doing?'

'One thing only at this moment; we're trying to establish the facts.'

He watched her nod curtly, watched the slipstream catch her hair behind her blue hairband . . . He wrenched his mind away.

The facts. The facts were that he had grown up always in the shadow of his elder brother. Tom the achiever, the Rhodes scholar, the youngest man to reach grade in the State Department. People deferred to Tom. He was a man who always had an opinion to offer; and mostly it was right.

He couldn't remember with any precision when things had begun to change. At some time in his early twenties he had begun to see his brother differently, had maybe even begun to see through him. Certainly to lose the lifetime of admiration he had felt. Now he began to see Tom as a desperate scrabbler after success in Washington, a professional success that made him pander to people like Joyce Hartmann, a social success that made someone as rough and ready and vulnerable as their father a liability, someone to be patronised, shoved into a corner, pretending he didn't exist. That had been just the beginning of it.

So Adam had come first to despise his brother, finally to blame him for his father's suicide. Those were the facts. Most

of them. All those facts that didn't include Claire.

At Putney Hospital they began to cross Barnes Common. 'Last night,' he said. 'Tell me how it happened.'

'I called the police to tell them that Corby had been at Old Church Street on Sunday night.'

'You spoke to Abbeline himself?'

'I told him I had significant further information. I remember choosing the words with care '

He nodded, watching the waving trees on either side of the road.

'The Superintendent arrived within twenty minutes,' she said. 'He had a couple of men with him.'

'How was Tom by then?'

'Nothing you'd recognise. I tried to stop him drinking while we were waiting, but I couldn't.'

'So by the time the police arrived he was pretty well out of it?'

'Is this important?'

'Could be. He would have to be in a condition to at least answer coherently.'

'Drink takes Tom in an unusual way. Mostly he remains coherent. But he was answering on automatic. To the main question, why hadn't he reported to the police that she had been at Old Church Street Sunday night, he was just silent.'

'Made no attempt to answer?'

'Looked down at the carpet and said nothing.'

'Did they ask you the same question?'

'Of course. But I could see that Abbeline at least believed I hadn't seen Corby that night What he wanted to know was how that could be. I then spent two of the worst hours of my life while I tried to describe my own comings and goings Sunday night without saying I'd walked in on Tom in bed

with someone. Abbeline kept pressing. Why had I grabbed my packed bag to go and spend the night at my office the night before I was due to fly to Moscow? I fumbled about but none of my answers made sense and Abbeline knew it. I was taking the flak. If Corby was there, how come I hadn't seen her? What time did I leave for the office? Why did I leave to sleep at the office? It was obvious to them that something had happened.'

'A fight. Something that decided you to go and stay at your office.'

She nodded.

'And they began to get heavy?'

'Not exactly. Tom was so drunk by then he certainly couldn't think straight. He thought the police were accusing him of killing her. Which at that stage they weren't. His mistake was to try and maintain the pretence Joyce Hartmann was there that night.' She stopped. 'It became an awful, muddled farce.'

'I can hear it,' he said with a half-smile. 'It's also a cop's opportunity Did they ask to speak to Joyce Hartmann?'

She nodded. 'And Tom retracted his story, of course. Immediately. He was totally confused. Abbeline, the Superintendent, started turning the screw and Tom blurted it all out He reached a point of desperation where he didn't even seem to be ashamed of it. It was horrifying.'

'He wasn't arrested straightaway?'

'No, he was taken to Barnes for further questioning. They hadn't charged him when I rang during the night, but by now who knows?'

'What's happening at the house?'

'At Old Church Street? There are about twenty policemen in overalls, brushing, dusting, measuring every room.' She

shivered. 'Not a trace of blood so far, I heard one of them report to the man in charge.' She shivered again. 'I can't believe this is happening. I suppose most of all I can't believe this is happening to me.'

'Claire,' he said slowly. 'I can stay with you through this. I've got as long as you like.'

She drove for a moment, then shook her head. 'See Tom. See what you can do for him. I'm okay.'

He nodded, turning away immediately, looking out at the open heathland around them. 'I thought this was London,' he said.

'It is,' she said. 'Barnes Common. You can see the building where they're holding Tom through the trees. An idyllic setting.'

She parked the car in the rear car park and they got out.

'One thing you haven't told me is how Tom reacted to the idea that Corby was dead,' Adam said suddenly.

She stood still, bent slightly forward to lock the car. 'Was it really a surprise, you're asking me?'

He nodded, his eyes on her.

She locked the car and stood up straight. 'The craziest thing is I can't remember. I suppose I was so tied up in the fact that he had slept with her . . . Maybe you can understand that?'

'Maybe . . .' he said. They began to walk towards the entrance. 'Before we go in, what do you make of the man in charge of the case?'

'Young, not a bad-looking guy. Probably very bright. Certainly willing to admit his mistakes. Says it comes from the fact that his great-grandfather was the cop who failed to track down Jack the Ripper. Don't take him for granted.'

He nodded and they mounted the ramp, the sun shining on the blue police light.

While Adam Garrison was taken in to see his brother in the windowless interview room, Claire was shown into a first floor office overlooking the police car park. Within a few moments Jack Abbeline joined her, carrying two cups of coffee.

He sat down in an easy chair opposite her and asked her permission to smoke. She nodded briefly

He lit a cigarette. 'I can imagine what you're going through at this moment, Dr Garrison.'

'Can you?'

He thought for a moment 'No, you're right. Probably not. But I've seen a lot of innocent people when a crime's been committed in a family. All different classes of people '

'And what do you conclude?'

He smiled briefly. 'That I have very little idea of what they're going through. But I have to say something, don't I?'

'Do you really believe my husband killed his sister?'

'We haven't charged him yet.'

'But you're still keeping him here.'

'For the moment.'

'Why?'

'Apart from what happened between your husband and Corby at Old Church Street that night? I can charge him with that if I want to keep him.'

'Apart from that.'

'Let's say, in addition to that,' Abbeline said neutrally, 'he has to be the principal suspect.'

'What about the boyfriend who was going to take her to Paris?'

'We don't even know if he exists,' Abbeline said, drawing on his cigarette.

'The girls at St Anthony's think he does. They made a point of saying he was taking her to Paris.'

Abbeline sipped his coffee. For a moment he was silent. 'That's important, surely.'

'Your husband admitted last night that he intended to take Corby to Paris,' he said slowly.

Claire got up and walked to the window. She stood for a moment at the window looking at the lines of white police cars and the few visitors' cars, her own BMW among them, in their own segregated enclosure. She was trying hard to think. With her back to Abbeline she said 'I'm going to Paris to meet my father tomorrow. Originally Tom was coming out to join me on the weekend.' She turned round. 'It so happens he hadn't mentioned anything to me about bringing Corby.'

'He had to her.'

She shrugged angrily. 'You can't make a big point of that.'

'Perhaps not, Dr Garrison. But I'm thinking of the super-mysterioso lover.'

'Tom?' she said incredulously.

'What better reason for Corby to keep it super-mysterious from even her closest friends than if the lover were her brother?'

Claire shuddered. The movement of clouds above the Common dropped a shaft of barred sunlight at her feet. And as quickly removed it. 'You're saying there was no current boyfriend, no new older man that she had recently met?' Claire asked carefully. 'You're saying Corby had a need to talk, to boast, but she couldn't boast about Tom, so she invented someone.'

He inclined his head. 'It's something I might be saying.'

His eyes were locked on her face. She looked away, unnerved.

'You must admit that Corby's behaviour in going straight home doesn't suggest she was desperately anxious to meet a boyfriend. Unless he was at home.'

'Don't play with me, Superintendent. Why would Corby go home to see Tom? If they were going to meet it would have been at some restaurant, not at home. Corby would have thought I was at Old Church Street Sunday evening.'

He seemed to change the subject. 'When did you last see Corby?'

'She had a free weekend the weekend before.'

'Did you talk about your trip to Moscow?'

'I suppose I mentioned it. I spend a lot of time in Russia. A trip to Moscow wasn't that unusual.'

'But Corby knew you were going the following weekend?'

Claire swallowed. She was suddenly sure she could guess what he was driving at.

'I've been in touch with your office, Dr Garrison. The Foundation secretary tells me that, in fact, there was some mix-up with your flight to Moscow.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, there was.'

'Your original plan was to leave for Moscow Sunday afternoon rather than Monday morning.'

'Aeroflot double-booked my seat,' she said. 'The next plane available was the British Airways Monday-morning flight.'

'When was that change made?'

'It was pretty much last-minute. You'd have to ask the Foundation secretary.'

'I did,' he said. 'I believe she only told you about the flight change Sunday morning.' He paused. 'Did you call Corby on Sunday?'

'No . . .'

'Did your husband?'

'Not that I'm aware . . .' She knew where he was heading.

'So when Corby ran away from school on Sunday night, she still believed that you had already left for Moscow during the afternoon.'

She felt sick to her stomach.

'Is that not the case, Dr Garrison?'

'If my husband was expecting her, as you're suggesting, he could have called her at the school and told her I would be at home that night.'

'But I'm not suggesting he was expecting her,' Abbeline said. 'I'm exploring the possibility it was a surprise to him. One he took full advantage of.'

'For God's sake! Is that necessary?'

'Was your husband interested in art, painting?' Abbeline continued flatly.

She looked up at him, surprised at the sudden change of subject. 'Not more than I am, for instance.'

'You go to exhibitions from time to time.'

'Most people I know do.'

'Did you ever hear him talk of the painter Otto Dix?'

'Otto Dix was not my husband's favourite painter, Superintendent. In fact I doubt if Tom has ever heard of him.'

She sat there in the airless room. She was trying to defend Tom. But did she really believe he had killed Corby? Did she even accept that it was a possibility? A month ago she would have said she knew Tom, that he wasn't capable of violence. But what would she say now, about Tom the

stranger? 'Whatever you think about Tom's actions,' she said, 'whatever I think about them, there's still nothing to connect him to Corby's death.'

'There's a plaster cast we took on the riverbank,' Abbeline said. 'A bare left foot. I'm quite sure it was made by the man who carried Corby's body to the water's edge. I won't deny that soft Thames mud is not the best medium to take a cast from. But the length and breadth of foot correspond with the measurements we have taken from your husband.'

'And measurements you might have taken from a million other men.'

'Not a million other men over six two. That's taller than most people imagine. Men boast about their height, you see. Look at me. I'm quite a tall fellow, you might say. I'm a little over five eleven. But I usually round it up to six feet.'

'I'm not a lawyer, Superintendent, but I'd say that in a British court you'd need more than you've got.'

'If you weren't the suspect's wife I'd say it was early days, Dr Garrison.'

There was a knock on the door, and the policewoman who had been with them yesterday stood in the doorway. 'Could we have a word?' she asked the Superintendent.

Abbeline got up and followed her out. Claire sat alone watching the pattern of sunlight on the grey vinyl. She realised the stresses of the last twelve hours had given her, more than anything, a desperate sense of being alone. In the car coming here, Adam had offered to stay on in London for a few days once he had seen Tom, but she had refused. To be with Adam promised a further layer of complication in her already intolerably complicated life. Adam was part of the family, part of Tom and Corby's family. Steven Ross was new and different; she found she wished, beyond

everything at this moment, that Steven was with her

When Abbeline came back his mood had changed. He stood for a moment just inside the door, looking down at her with something, she thought, approaching sympathy. Still without speaking, he entered the room and took his seat She waited as they sat in silence, the coffee cups clinking in the saucers as they both drank After a few moments Claire could bear it no longer. 'Will you be charging him, Superintendent?'

He stood up 'I'm afraid the answer's yes, Dr Garrison. I've just heard. We have some important additional evidence.' He paused. 'A witness.'

13

Adam Garrison stood for a moment in the doorway of the secure interview room. His brother was no longer looking at him. 'We're doing all we can,' Adam said, and heard that desperate sentence echoing back in a dozen TV films from kindly white-coated doctors, tough heart-of-gold cops, and a dozen versions of himself, the lawyer. 'We're doing all we can.'

Tom Garrison sat at the plain table, looking as if he were prepared for a meeting at the embassy. He was shaved, his hair brushed, his tie knotted. If he had slept last night in his suit it was not apparent. 'The important thing,' he said, not looking at Adam, 'is that Corby is dead. That's what we all have to live with.'

A middle-aged police sergeant in white shirt and black epaulettes tapped Tom on the shoulder. 'Come with me please, Mr Garrison,' he said, one hand already under Tom's elbow.

Adam watched Tom taken away, then turned and walked back down the blank white corridor. Corby's dead. That's what we all have to live with. Even at this critical point in his life his brother was a phoney.

A young policewoman held open a door. In the room a heavy-set man stood by the window, but it was Abbeline behind the desk. 'Mrs Garrison is waiting in the car, sir,' he

said 'But I just wonder if you'd spare me a few moments.'

'Some questions?'

'Yes.'

'I have some for you, too.'

'We'll see,' Abbeline said warily. 'Sit down, Mr Garrison. This is Inspector Briden, who's working with me on this case.'

Briden nodded to him, and Adam sat and watched Abbeline frown at the dozen objects on the alien desk in front of him. Then he sat back in his chair. 'All right, Mr Garrison – your questions.'

'It comes down to one question only.' Adam watched Abbeline's eyebrows rise. 'You have a ten-man scene-of-crime team tramping my brother's house. We both know what they're looking for. Have they found any sign of what must have been a particularly bloody murder? Or not?'

'It's possible . . .' Abbeline composed his face . . . 'to commit murder, even with a knife, and leave no trace.'

'Is it?'

'I have to make a decision, Mr Garrison. I think, on balance, I'm prepared to believe it is. Just. But I also believe we'll find the evidence we're looking for when all the tests come through.'

'You've found nothing yet.'

'Nothing has been confirmed.'

'Your case against my brother gets more slender by the moment.'

'I don't know.' Abbeline paused. 'Did you know your brother was once arrested on a pornography offence, Mr Garrison?'

Adam froze.

'And did you know that at the time of a particularly violent

Boston murder in the mid eighties your brother was brought in for questioning?' Abbeline smiled bleakly. 'I think you did.'

They walked across the police car park together without speaking. Only when they were in the BMW, pulling out onto the road that leads across the common to Putney, did Claire ask him: 'So, as a lawyer, how do you think it looks?'

'This is not my field, Claire,' he said. 'But the way things are I'd say it looks worse than maybe it is.'

'No hard facts?'

'Not unless that witness proves to be witness to something crucial.' For a moment he was silent. 'Did Abbeline say anything about Boston to you?'

'No. What about Boston?'

'When Tom was at Harvard did you know he was arrested with a couple of others.'

'No?' Her eyebrows had shot up. 'Tom told you that?'

'Just now. Five minutes later Abbeline told me the same story.'

She felt weak in the legs. 'What was Tom arrested for?'

'He and a couple of other guys were caught in some joint in Roxbury watching some heavy porn. You could be booked for that sort of thing in those days.'

'The police aren't making anything out of that? It's undergraduate stuff, surely '

'No, Tom didn't think Abbeline was making anything out of the arrest. But there's a rather nasty epilogue that doesn't help.'

'What's that?'

'Tom and the others were discharged. On condition they took six psychiatric therapy sessions.'

'So?'

'Years later, back in 1984, there was a woman killed on Gainsborough Street. The cops pulled in everybody who had charges or a record of required therapy.'

'Tom was pulled in?'

'He was already in the State Department by then. But he'd returned to Boston to do some sort of course. He was staying with my parents. Their apartment was just a few blocks from where the woman was murdered.'

'They had nothing against him.'

'No.'

Claire had picked up the hesitation in Adam's voice. She turned the car over Putney Bridge, her eyes on the road ahead.

After a few moments, Adam picked up the thread again. 'No,' he said. 'Nothing against him. Tom had done his obligatory six sessions at Bridgewater, a mental institution just outside Boston. He admits he picked up a pretty bad rating. He can't remember the details but he'd argued a few times with the psychiatrist. Objected or maybe got a kick out of a woman asking the questions. You can guess the sort of questions. Played the Harvard jock, you know . . . The psychiatrist didn't like it. Gave him a report full of nasty hints, he says. Joyce Hartmann managed to bury it, but she's not going to be trying any longer.'

Claire drove slowly down the King's Road. Twenty-four hours ago Tom Garrison had been before her eyes, in three dimensions and full colour. Now every few hours the kaleidoscope got itself shaken, bits of her belief in Tom, not as a husband but just as a normal man, flew off in all directions.

However all this turned out, she knew she would never

get the wickedly sparkling pieces of coloured glass back into the shape of Tom Garrison again.

In Old Church Street Claire made coffee and sandwiches and took them up to Corby's room. 'The living room, the bedroom and the small bathroom are still off-limits,' she said to Adam as he turned from the window. 'They're very polite and nice about it but they make it quite clear where I can go and where I can't go in my own house.'

'What's important is that they've found nothing. At least, that's my guess. They've no case unless they find clear signs that it was done here in this house. Let's get to work, Claire.'

He began stripping the bed and emptying the contents of her desk and chest of drawers onto a single sheet he had replaced on the mattress.

'You say the police did this last night?'

She nodded. 'What do you hope to find that the police haven't?'

'Anything unusual. Something you recognise as unusual but the police wouldn't. We'll have to do her room at school too.'

'Too late. I've spoken to the school. The police have boxed up the contents of her bedroom and carried the lot away.'

'Tell me about the black silk shirt she was wearing when she died. Tom made a big play of it this morning. He seems to think that shirt's going to get him off the hook.'

'The girls at school say she was wearing it on the Sunday night she disappeared.'

'And it was found rolled up, presumably by whoever killed her, and dropped in the bushes on the riverbank?'

'Which surely suggests that the man attached some importance to it.'

He was silent. 'Girls usually like showing off something like an expensive new shirt to each other, don't they?'

'Her friends never saw it until Sunday afternoon when she was getting ready to leave school They talked about it but Corby seems to have given them the impression she bought it in London the week before It's all a little hazy. Now, of course, it's become a key item. The police are trying to trace where it was bought.'

'But Tom insists he didn't buy it.'

She nodded.

'Do you believe that?'

'I don't know. They were out shopping together the last weekend she was in London.'

'Did he buy her a present?'

'I don't remember anything. I suppose he must have.'

'Something expensive like a silk shirt he thought it better you didn't see?'

'Maybe he's denying it because he knows that a mystery present helps to establish a mystery boyfriend,' she said.

He took a sandwich. 'But it still doesn't explain why somebody, whether it was Tom or a new boyfriend, was so anxious to make sure the shirt wasn't found on Corby's body.' He bit on the sandwich, his eyes roaming over piles of sweaters, jeans, skirts and underwear. 'She must have spent a fortune,' he said.

'Tom made sure she was never short of money. There was nothing I could do. I was just the jealous wife. Jealous of the time and attention he lavished on Corby.'

'And you're blaming me for not being around.'

She breathed deeply. 'I don't know, Adam,' she said. 'Paris is half an hour on a plane. You might have provided a counterweight.'

'And prevented all this happening?'

'I'm not saying that.' She poured coffee for both of them. 'Nor am I blaming you for not being around. I'm just sorry you weren't more.' She looked up at him. 'Before it became too late.'

He stood up, his face set. 'Okay, you go through her clothes. Pockets first. Put anything, literally anything you find, on the desk. Then labels. You're checking for an unusual label, a shop Corby would never have used, a shop in another city perhaps. Or jewellery, any piece you've never seen before. We're looking for a present we can definitely tie down to this mystery boyfriend.'

'You believe he exists?'

He looked at her. 'At this moment it's just too early to decide he doesn't.'

They worked in silence broken only by an occasional question about something he had found in the desk – a name, a bill, a scribbled note from a friend. After an hour he straightened up. 'Nothing here that any bright young thing of today might not have.' He was looking down at an open box of Fiesta coloured condoms.

Claire followed his glance and grunted. 'Nothing here either. A leather jacket I didn't know she had. A necklace that must have cost the down payment on a house. But both from Mayfair shops just round the corner from the embassy.' She waved her husband's American Express statement in her hand. 'They're both down here. Tom bought them.'

He was glancing quickly through a letter. 'Who's Emma Reardon-Smith?'

'Corby's best friend at school.'

'She writes a hot letter.' He turned and began to look

through the shelf of books. 'I don't think we've got much here.'

'It would help if we knew what the additional evidence was that Abbeline was so impressed by.'

'He's not going to reveal that yet.'

He had his back to her, standing at the bookshelf, but she saw him stiffen, heard the beginning of a groan of dismay.

'What is it?'

He turned. In his hand he had a glossy A4-size art book. He lifted it to her. On the cover a parade of painted prostitutes marched past a legless German soldier. The title read: *Otto Dix (1889 – 1968).*

She stood next to him as he turned the open book towards her. The flyleaf read: 'Enjoy, enjoy. Love, Tom.'

She sat heavily on the bed. 'Maybe we have to face some facts,' she said.

He stood, looking down at her. 'It's beginning to stack up. But it's a long way from conclusive,' he said shortly.

She fell back against the bedhead. 'That's the lawyer speaking. Not the brother who can't stand Tom's guts.'

He nodded slowly. 'That's right, Claire. That's the lawyer speaking. Right now the brother daren't open his mouth.'

14

'You're a witch-doctor,' she said. 'In ten minutes you've changed this appalling day into something bearable.'

'I came across Strand Antiques a few months ago,' Steven Ross said. 'It's a wonderland of old things – china, pictures, books, furniture . . . the impedimenta of ages. I once picked up a Mayokovsky sketchbook here for ten dollars.'

They were standing in a shop crowded with furniture and bric-à-brac. She had never seen *brocante* in such profusion Mirrors and pictures hung on the walls, glass and china jostled with Victorian corkscrews, toasting-forks and boot scrapers A fine eighteenth-century commode carried a bust of Wellington, his shoulders draped with a lace shawl

'There are six rooms upstairs,' Steven Ross told her, 'and a couple more for books.' He dropped his voice. 'An Aladdin's Cave run by seven eccentric women and an opera singer, I'm told.'

They spent half an hour in the shop wandering separately through different rooms, meeting up occasionally with a start of recognition on a staircase. Claire bought an old French silk-lined leather wallet and a ring from before the turn of the century. Only as they left the shop did she notice that he was carrying a small package wrapped in newspaper

They walked down the short slope to the river and chose one of the pubs, the City Barge. When they were seated in a

window seat with glasses of beer he handed her the parcel.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Open it and take a look. It's a present, that's all you can reasonably expect me to say.'

She looked up at him as he sat back, relaxed, urging her to open the wrapped parcel on the table. Claire realised that she had never seen him quite like this. Always before there was a sort of formality about him, but then she had never before seen him except in a business suit, a lightweight grey or dark blue. In a pale green Lacoste polo shirt and white jeans he looked altogether less serious. His blue eyes and light hair took colour from the sun.

She rested a hand on the parcel.

'Are you still planning to go to Paris tomorrow?' he asked her.

'Yes Midas refuses to come to London, ever. He hates the city. This weekend the French edition of his book is being published. Various members of the Foundation are required to be there from New York I'm expected for a meeting with the press.'

'He knows what's happened?'

'I've called him in New York and brought him up to date.'

'Do you mind if I come over?'

'To Paris?' She smiled. 'I'd love it if you came.'

'I don't care,' he said, 'if it's just a free hour or two for lunch, or a salami baguette snatched at the rail station. It'll be worth it.'

She lifted her eyebrows.

'And I'll even make a genuine appointment,' he said. 'We have a contributor, an American who runs a stud farm just south of Paris. If you won't see me, she will.'

'I bet.'

They sat smiling at each other.

'You know,' she said, 'I'm still haunted by the idea we've met before.'

'Haunted?'

She shrugged. 'Okay, not haunted. But I do have this feeling. And it won't go away.'

'Is it a good feeling?'

'It's an exciting feeling.'

'Then I've no complaints.'

She was silent. Thoughts of Tom and Corby came back to her. He drank his beer, looking out at the small craft on the river, not hassling her to keep talking. It was one of the things she most liked about him. One of them.

'It's an amazing thing to contemplate,' she said slowly. 'The idea that the man you've lived with for six years might, just might, be a murderer.'

'Talk about it,' he said.

She shook her head. 'I can't. Because that's where my thoughts stop. I suppose I don't know whether I believe it or not.' She reached out for the package. 'Instead I'll open my present.'

'Do you want another beer?'

She shook her head and he took his empty glass to the bar and had it refilled. Beneath the thin cotton of the polo shirt she could see the muscles of his slim back as he leaned across the bar to hand over the money.

He came back and set the beer mug down on the table, watching her face as she began to open the packet.

Holding it in one hand she unwrapped the layers of newspaper with the other. Inside she could detect a shape, small, about two inches high. Her spirits lifted. The childlike excitement of receiving a present was having its effect. She

glanced up at him and smiled before unfolding the last layer of plain paper.

A pale yellow Chinese snuff bottle was cradled in her hand. 'It's beautiful,' she said slowly. Taking the bottle between her forefinger and thumb, she held it to the light, examining the miniature painted woods and streams. 'It's Doaguang, isn't it? God, it's marvellous.'

Carefully, holding the bottle clear, she reached up to kiss him. He turned his head slightly to bring his lips against hers. She let the pressure increase a second, felt the parting of his lips, then drew her head back. 'It must have cost a fortune,' she said to cover her tingling awareness.

He shook his head. 'At Strand Antiques they practically give them away.'

'You knew I collected them?'

'Once in Moscow you made a winging mention of Chinese snuff bottles, so I gambled.'

'You're extraordinary.'

From the direction of the far bank the sun glittered on his hair. 'Today,' he said, 'I feel extraordinary.'

Claire had dropped Steven at his hotel in Sloane Square before driving back to Old Church Street.

'Paris tomorrow,' he had said. 'Maybe you'll be able to put some of this behind you for a couple of days.'

She had reached up and put her cheek against his, holding him to her for a moment. They would fly together to Paris tomorrow afternoon. Perhaps he was right, a new city would hold back this tidal wave of horror that had been engulfing her in London.

At Old Church Street, as usual, her driveway was blocked, and she was forced to take the car on to Cheyne Walk before

she found a place to park. As she walked back to the house she was glad Adam had gone back to Paris. He didn't understand that she didn't even want to think about Tom any more. Couldn't bear the constant turning over of the questions in her mind. If not Tom, who? If Tom, how and why exactly?

As she approached her house she saw it was a white Alfa Romeo that was blocking the driveway She seemed to remember it had happened once or twice recently. Okay, so someone local. She would write them a terse note. She rested her purse on the offending car and took out pen and notepad. The irritation she felt was paradoxically calming. Triviality was edging out thoughts of Tom. She wrote a dignified 'Will you be so kind . . .' note and folded it under the wiper blades. A small sense of achievement stayed with her up the steps to the empty house.

The door was ajar and two plain-clothes policemen, heavily laden with cardboard boxes and rolls of tape, were just leaving. 'That's it, then, Mrs Garrison,' the sergeant she'd spoken to this morning said. 'We won't trouble you any more.'

She stopped him with a hand on his arm. 'I have to know,' she said. 'Did you find . . . anything?'

He shrugged awkwardly.

'Please,' she said desperately, 'I have to know. I have to know whether a murder was committed in my house.'

The sergeant took a deep breath. 'We've still got a lot of tests to do, Mrs Garrison.'

'But so far you've found nothing.'

His eyes met hers. 'I won't be able to tell you that until the forensic tests are complete.'

She understood what he was saying She thanked him as

if she had anything to thank him for and went into the house, walking through the hall and straight upstairs.

Sun shone brightly through the ample bedroom windows. Light illuminated every corner of the room. She looked with distaste at the bed, stripped by the police, the sheets and bedcover taken away. Her eyes travelled across the carpet No, she thought, consciously straightening her back, no murder took place in this room. What she knew had happened was bad enough.

She took out two leather cases and packed a few things for France. She thought of the last time she had packed for Moscow and the rush of events since then. Undecided, she leafed through her wardrobe. She was in a frame of mind totally unfamiliar to her. Think of Tom and a cloud descended. Think of Steven Ross and . . . She began putting clothes out onto the bed, finding it hard to concentrate.

Finishing her packing, she went downstairs and made herself a cup of coffee. Carrying it, stopping to sip from the cup from time to time, she walked slowly into the living-room. Whichever way it went she didn't want to keep the house. Sell it and move back home. To New York perhaps. Somewhere not too far from Steven Ross maybe?

She was standing at the window, sipping the hot coffee. The Alfa parked across her driveway gleamed in the sunlight and her note fluttered under the windshield wiper. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a movement. Her neighbour, the Honourable Mrs Anthea Buckhurst, came down her front steps and hurried to the Alfa Romeo.

Claire pulled back as Anthea Buckhurst's anxious glance raked the windows of her neighbour's house. Watching, Claire thought there was something absurdly furtive about the woman's movements as she reached out, snatched the

note from the car and ran quickly back into her own house.

Claire stood looking down at the Alfa, drinking her coffee. Something was tugging at her memory. When was she last standing, looking down at a white Alfa from almost exactly this same angle? What was so immediate yet so elusive about the picture?

She glanced down again at the car, at the sparkle of sunlight on its polished hard top, and was suddenly, shockingly reminded.

Now wait a minute, she said to herself. But she had already put down her coffee cup and was heading for the front door.

She ran down the steps, wheeled into the next driveway, up the steps, and hammered with the brass lion knocker on the door, hammered loud enough to be heard halfway down the King's Road.

Anthea Buckhurst appeared at the third spate of hammering. Her face was pale, but defiant. As the door opened Claire launched at her. 'That white Alfa, it's yours isn't it?'

Anthea Buckhurst recoiled. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I was loaded down with shopping. I'll repark it as soon as I have a moment to spare.'

'It's a nice car,' Claire said.

Her neighbour looked at her blankly, surprised at her change of tone. 'Thank you. Yes, it is.'

'Distinctive,' Claire said.

'Yes . . .'

'You don't see too many about.'

'Not too many.' Anthea Buckhurst was closing the door.

'Though as a matter of fact I saw one this morning,' Claire said. 'It took me a while to put two and two together.' She braced the toe of her shoe against the door. 'I looked down a

line of police cars and I saw a white Alfa among them. I saw your car this morning, Mrs Buckhurst, in the police parking lot at Barnes. And five minutes later the police announced to me they had a new damning piece of evidence against my husband. A witness.'

The defiance had faded from her neighbour's face.

'I'm coming in, Mrs Buckhurst, and you're going to tell me exactly what you told the police.'

'I don't think that would be legally correct.'

'I don't give a fuck what you think,' Claire said. 'That's what you're going to do.'

A minute later the two women were sitting opposite each other in the sitting-room. 'It was my duty to report what I'd seen,' Anthea Buckhurst said, a note of defiance sliding back into her voice. 'I believe that if one can help the police, one must.'

'Don't apologise,' Claire said. 'Just tell me.'

'In a town house you're forced to share some of your neighbour's secrets, however unwillingly.'

'However unwillingly,' Claire said.

The other woman nodded, her eyes avoiding Claire's, travelling over the silver-framed photographs arranged on the gleaming piano-top. 'I'm not sure I know where to start.'

'Start at the beginning.'

'The beginning was the awful rumpus I heard. I regret to say your voice carries even through the party wall, Mrs Garrison.'

'I'd never have guessed. So Tom and I had a fight. I left.'

'Slamming the door behind you. About an hour later Mr Garrison's sister arrived – Corby. She'd forgotten her keys and was ringing, hammering on the door. Your husband must have gone to bed.' Her face was deadpan, devoid of any

suggestion. But she had read the hints in the press.

'I came back about midnight I guess,' Claire said 'Later even.'

'And within a few minutes there was more noise. Your voice again, I'm sorry to say, Mrs Garrison.'

'Just tell me what you saw. Did you see Corby leaving? Did you see my husband putting her in a cab?'

'No.'

'You didn't,' Claire said slowly.

'I saw you leaving.'

'And then what?'

'Then I went back to sleep. I felt I had to take advantage of the sudden calm.'

Claire grimaced. 'What woke you?'

'Your husband carrying something down the stairs.'

'You could hear that?'

'I'm a light sleeper. I got up and looked at the clock It was about an hour after you'd left. I heard the front door close and went to my bedroom window.'

'And what did you tell the police you saw?'

She hesitated, pursing her lips. 'I saw your husband carrying something . . . Carrying a body out to the boot of his car,' she said in a rush of words.

'A body? Corby? No you didn't.'

'A body,' she said. 'I could tell by the shape.'

'I'd told him to quit the house,' Claire said. 'He was carrying a pile of suits.'

She shook her head.

'Mrs Buckhurst, don't you realise the seriousness of what you're saying. A pile of suits, that's all you saw.'

'A body,' Anthea Buckhurst said stubbornly 'In my very carefully considered opinion, it was a body.'

15

Harry Bathgate stood in his kitchen at Conroy Road, Hammersmith, looking down at his wife Ella, the two poised for a moment like characters from a Hockney painting, she at the kitchen table, he standing just inside the door, existing in the same room, looking at each other but not seeing.

Ella Bathgate, grey-haired, a year or two older than her husband, broke the silence. 'That's an awful thing to tell me,' she said.

He stood, unmoving.

'You're telling me you picked up this girl. This girl whose body they found in the river.'

Harry, jacketless, hot, pushed up his sleeves. 'They haven't found a body yet,' he said. 'Just a few items of clothing. Skirt, underclothes and things. At Barnes,' he added. 'On the riverbank there.'

'You know a lot about it. About the details.'

'I read the paper.'

'She asked you for a lift?'

'That's right. I said no.'

'And she scratched your face? For nothing?'

He nodded slowly. 'That's it.'

The silence descended again. Harry walked across to the refrigerator and took out a can of beer. 'There was nothing to it, Ella,' he said to his wife's back. 'But it's something

I've got to tell the police about. They have to know.'

'Just tell me this, Harry How did all this talking go on?'

He ripped the cap off the beer can and swung the refrigerator door to with his elbow. 'I don't know what you mean, how did all this talking go on. There weren't much talking anyway.'

Her mouth turned down. 'What I'm asking you to explain, Harry, is how this girl scratched your face and goodness knows what else happened when you're in a car travelling along and she's by the side of the road pulling up her skirt at the passing drivers?'

'I stopped at the lights,' Harry lied. He had prepared this part of the story. 'Stopped at the lights and she skips up and jerks open the car door. She's in sitting next to me before I can do aught about it.'

Ella sat nodding. Not at him 'You'd better pour me a glass of sherry,' she said.

Harry moved quickly, taking the sherry and a glass from the cupboard and setting it before her. This was a rare occurrence, associated with Christmas and birthdays. Today he wasn't sure what it betokened.

'And a cigarette,' she said.

That definitely didn't bode well. He gave her a cigarette and lit it.

She inhaled inexpertly, blew out a tumble of smoke. 'You know what everybody's going to say,' she said.

'I don't see why.' He sat down at the table with her.

'You don't see why everybody's not going to say there goes Harry Bathgate, a dirty old man who spends his evenings kerb-crawling for prostitutes.'

'She was a schoolgirl.'

'Kerb-crawling for schoolgirls, then. Does that make it any better?'

'Some might say that,' Harry said heavily. 'Most people'll understand.'

'Will the police understand?'

'It's not a question of understanding. I've got important information for them.'

'There's nothing you can say will help now. They got somebody for it.'

'Her brother. But what if it's not him, Ella?'

'They don't make mistakes.'

'Sometimes they do. Sometimes if a witness like me holds back.' He looked at his wife. Last year she'd suffered a stroke, still wasn't fully recovered.

'You can't be that important.' It was more a belief she held about their lives than about any evidence he might have to give the police.

'Ella, what I've got to tell them could prove him innocent or guilty, I don't know which. But I know it's important.'

'Well, you're not going to them, Harry, that's flat. I'm not going to be pointed out in the street, her who's married to that man who picked up that girl. You don't understand, Harry. Even though you're a salesman and are always going on about how you understand people. You don't. Just give 'em the facts, you say. But people don't believe facts. They believe what they want to believe, what it pleases them to believe. The facts don't make a good story to gossip about. If they hear about it, they're going to believe the worst.'

Harry stretched a hand out and rested it on her arm. 'Look at me. I've got to go to the police, Ella. I know I have.'

She shook her head. 'We'll be made a laughing-stock. There's no one we can trust not to just trample on us, don't

you see that? No,' she said, 'I'm not having it.' She looked up at the clock 'Look at you, you're making me miss my programme.' Crossing to the television set in the corner of the room, she switched it on and stood, looking down at the screen as the familiar, comforting music swelled above a shot of a massive stone-built country house with titles over: *The Scattersby Inheritance*. Then, as the music died, Jo Saunders' face filled the screen.

At Old Church Street the house seemed strangely empty without the police tramping up and down the stairs. Already exhausted by last night's interrogation, Claire half drew the blinds in the sitting-room and collapsed on the sofa. She had a desperate need not to think about the events of the last two days, a need only Steven Ross seemed to understand.

She closed her eyes. Within minutes she had drifted off to sleep. When the phone woke her less than an hour later, she assumed immediately it was Steven and was baffled and disoriented by the woman's voice on the line, a familiar voice she realised, even as she fought off sleep. 'My husband and myself were both terribly upset to hear about Corby and about . . .'

'And about Tom?' Claire said, sitting up on the sofa. It was Emma Reardon-Smith's mother on the phone.

'Yes.'

'How can I help you, Mrs Reardon-Smith?'

'I hope really that I can be some help to you,' Emma's mother said. 'Or rather that Emma can.'

'The police have talked to her a couple of times already,' Claire said. 'I was present myself once.'

'She told me. The point is, Mrs Garrison . . .' Mrs Reardon-Smith stopped. Her breathing came over the line –

tense, embarrassed. 'I believe you should speak to Emma again. My husband is insisting we contact the police later today.'

'What about?'

'About information Emma withheld. It's only fair that you should hear first.'

Claire felt her stomach turn over sickeningly as she heard Emma's mother saying: 'I can believe it won't be a very pleasant thing for you to hear.'

When Steven Ross called ten minutes later he readily agreed to drive down to Windsor with Claire. The school had temporarily instituted a new weekend system. Parents were required to phone or personally pick up daughters for Friday afternoon, Saturday or Sunday exeats. Mrs Reardon-Smith had arranged for Claire to pick up Emma at five that afternoon.

So different this visit to Corby's school. On Wednesday, just two days ago, she had agreed to go with Abbeline, but in anger, still believing Corby was jerking them all around like rag dolls. Not for a minute then, Claire realised, had she really believed in a tragedy.

With Steven Ross driving, they passed the great mass of the castle on a sunny late summer afternoon that should have been devoted to a riverside stroll, or a boozy picnic on one of Scudamore's Edwardian punts with cushions and cane-backed seats and a long prow to nose under the cool overhang of trees.

Claire shook the tiredness from her head. Her purpose today was a century away from all that. She pointed the road out to Steven and they swung round the castle, still showing scars from the great fire, and up towards the school.

'I can't help wishing I'd met you in different circum-

stances,' he said. He smiled wryly. 'I like to think of myself as a light-hearted sort of fellow.'

'There hasn't been much chance for light-heartedness since you met me.'

'Except one evening in Moscow. And then we spent our time pouring out our past to each other.'

'It was a first date,' she said. 'What do you expect?'

He glanced at her. 'I'm looking forward to Paris,' was all he said.

She put her hand on his shoulder: 'Turn right at the lodge,' she said. 'If I ever get there, I'm looking forward to Paris too.'

The caretaker's lodge had been set up as a gatehouse. From his front door the caretaker identified the car and its occupants, phoned the school and gave them permission to proceed down the drive.

They drove up to the ample Victorian mansion that was St Anthony's. Low science buildings and language laboratories had been added during the sixty or seventy years the school had existed, but the charmless grey Gothic of the façade still dominated the approach from the drive. As they stopped, Claire could hear the low hum of the motorway to her left. Getting out of the car, she stood looking across the playing-field to where the lane marked the boundary of school property Beyond that, over a low hill, the purring traffic of the motorway. Corby must have gone that way. Across the playing-fields, over the lane where men sometimes lurked in darkened cars to watch The Show . . . But it was not one of the waiting men who had killed her. She had been killed in London. Thrown into the river within ten minutes' drive of Old Church Street. And Anthea Buckhurst was claiming, swearing, that she had seen Tom

lift a body into his car in the middle of the night.

Claire shuddered and turned away.

Steven rounded the car to stand next to her. 'Don't think about it,' he said. 'It doesn't help. Let's just do what we have to do this morning and concentrate on Paris.'

In the hall girls were passing in and out, mostly dressed in sports clothes for tennis or jogging. Emma, waiting on a sofa under a church-like stained-glass window, stood up when she saw them. She was wearing a sombre black cardigan over black jeans and no make-up. Claire wondered how long she had taken to decide on this morning's look.

They came together in the middle of the hallway and kissed on either cheek. Claire introduced Steven Ross, got a brief response from the girl's appreciative eyes before they all went out to the car. 'You have to sign me out at the gate.' Emma said. 'Corby used to call this place Colditz. She didn't know how right she was.'

Claire saw Steven Ross raise his eyebrows as he got into the driving seat. Claire was sitting beside him, Emma in the back. 'Where to?' he asked.

They drove back through Windsor and out on the river road towards Bray. Emma talked about the new restrictions, the roll-calls, the gate checks, parental permission for any activity outside the school, but she somehow contrived to say it in a long-suffering tone without mentioning the reason for it all.

On Claire's directions they swung right into the drive of the Oakley Court Hotel, travelled down the drive and parked before the entrance.

From the terrace of the hotel the waiter watched them cross the lawn to choose a table under a cedar tree. Actors, he decided, from Bray studios next door. The man in a grey

polo-neck sweater and hound's-tooth jacket, the woman in a skirt and expensive-looking dark jacket. The girl – well, you can't tell much from under-twenties. She could be wearing her Dad's old cardigan for all he knew, and have a mink coat in the wardrobe. He forced a smile and walked quickly across the lawn to greet them.

Emma, Claire noticed, had slumped into her seat, an adolescent listlessness in her expression. While Steven asked about the shipping family who had built Oakley Court and Claire told him about the horror films that were made there before the hotel company had reconstructed the building, Emma's face was turned towards the river, the Thames quite narrow here as it ran between summer meadows.

'I guess the girls talk about Corby all the time,' Ross said to Emma when the coffee arrived.

Emma shrugged. She was, he saw, acutely embarrassed.

'It's pretty terrifying having this happen to a friend.'

'We don't know what happened to her yet,' Emma said defensively.

'I think we do,' he said with finality. 'There comes a moment when it's pointless to string out the doubt. And there's no real doubt left in Corby's case.'

'God, it's awful,' she said. 'I can't bear it.'

'What is it you decided not to tell the police?' Ross asked.

She hesitated. 'It's about the shirt,' she said. 'The silk shirt.'

'You know where she got it?' Claire said.

'She stole it, Claire.'

'Stole it? Who from?'

'The mysterioso.' Emma raised her shoulders. 'Not

something I wanted to tell the police I knew about, obviously.'

'Did she tell any of the other girls?' Ross asked.

'Julia, Megs, her closest friends.'

'You're sure it wasn't more bravado?' Ross said. 'Just another Corby story?'

'If you knew Corby, you knew when she was telling the truth.'

'And you did?'

'I think Corby was fundamentally a very truthful person,' Emma said.

'Well maybe,' Claire said. 'Maybe it also depended on who she was talking to.'

'Of course.'

'What do you think?' Claire turned to Steven Ross.

'I think Emma's testimony brings the mystery lover right back into play,' he said.

'There's something else my father says I have to tell you,' Emma said.

Claire looked at her, saw a flush rising on her cheeks. 'Okay,' she said.

'He's a lawyer,' Emma said, awkwardly. 'He gets a bee in his bonnet, he never gives up.'

'Something else you thought it best not to tell the police?'

'It's not new.' Emma's expression was defensive again, uncertain of her ground.

'Not new?'

The girl nodded, still tense.

'About the mysterioso?'

'No.'

'About Tom?' Claire asked. 'Is it about Tom?'

'Yes. I'm sorry, Claire.'

They sat silently for a moment. 'Your father thinks it's important. You'd better tell me.'

For a second Emma hung her head. 'It's awful to say it. Awful. But we all knew about Tom,' Emma said, her lowered eyes rising to meet Claire's. 'We knew all along.'

'About Tom and Corby?'

'Yes.'

'We. You said we. Who?'

'The girls – Julia, me, a few others . . . Corby's friends.'

Claire's face was tense. 'How long? How long have you known?'

Emma made a hopeless gesture with her hands. 'From as soon as anything started, really.' She raised her shoulders. 'You know, from the first. Running commentary.'

Claire put back her head and looked up at the waving branches of the tree above them. Running through her mind were all those weekends Emma and Julia had been at Old Church Street, and the conspiratorial giggles that she had never realised were directed at her. The little bitch, she wanted to spit out. The miserable little bitch. But the little bitch was dead.

'I'm sorry, Claire. It's humiliating . . .'

'Shut up.'

Emma stopped talking.

Claire turned her eyes towards her. 'Is that what your father wanted you to tell me?'

'Yes. I am sorry, Claire. I really am. It must be awful for you.'

'Don't patronise me,' Claire said shortly. 'I'm not thinking straight this morning. I understand the point about the silk shirt. But why does your father attach so much importance

to telling the police that Corby revelled in what she was doing?'

'D'you mind if I smoke?' Emma said, chastened. She took out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. 'Dad says it's important for Tom's case.'

'How's that?'

'Dad says the police case must be built on the idea that Tom was the mysterioso.'

'That Corby was using the idea of a mysterious boyfriend, to cover for Tom, you mean.'

'That's it,' Emma said. 'But that couldn't be, could it? We were the only ones Corby ever told about the mysterioso and we already knew about Tom.'

'So,' Claire said slowly. 'So, if the mystery man didn't exist, there was no need to make him up.'

'My father says that, unless the police have serious further evidence, they won't be able to keep Tom. He'll be able to come home.'

He'll be able to come home! Claire stood up. She gestured towards the building. 'Well, thanks, Emma,' she said heavily. 'There's a phone in the lobby. I think you should call Superintendent Abbeline yourself.'

16

The sun, brilliant throughout the late afternoon, was now, as evening came, obscured by heavy bruised cloud. In minutes the atmosphere had changed within the house. Claire brought the bags she had packed for Paris down into the hall and wondered why, in God's name, she had said no to having dinner with Steven.

She stopped, looking at herself in the hall mirror. She was astonished at the speed with which Tom had been banished from all those corners of her thoughts and feelings which, as nothing more perhaps than a husband, he had nevertheless occupied for the last six years. But two things had happened in this last crowded week, and she was not sure which one had so effectively obliterated any residual feeling for Tom: the moment when she had entered the bedroom, worse now that she knew he was with Corby; or her meeting with Steven Ross in Moscow.

Whichever it was, it had had an effect: she had felt remote from Tom's predicament. And what had she felt when Abbeline had assured her that he was to be released tonight? She looked at herself, hands on hips. The full-length mirror showed a young woman in dark sweater, jeans and leather Gucci shoes. A blonde, slightly sad, or maybe puzzled, young woman.

Had she believed her husband was a murderer? Had she

believed the obsessive, alcoholic window-watcher next door who claimed that Tom had bumped and struggled down the steps with a body wrapped in plastic suit covers? Perhaps for a few hours she had. But if she had, why hadn't she suffered as a wife would expect to suffer? Was she really so self-centred, so spoilt, so damaged by her father's massive ego that she was immune from suffering on another's behalf?

She could defend herself perhaps by arguing that the moment she had discovered it was Corby in bed with Tom that night, all feeling had died. But had it really been such a shock, such a revelation? She had watched them together over the years, she had seen them walk into rooms, arms wrapped around each other, she had seen a dozen other small signs, but she had chosen to ignore them. And when she had discovered that it was Corby there in the bed there was a sense in which she had been relieved, yes, relieved that the nagging questions were over, the years of unworthy suspicion suddenly made worthy By the truth She grimaced at herself in the mirror. This was a Claire she was not enamoured of A Claire made by Midas and by Tom, a Claire made by men, in the image of men.

She felt drained of energy From the moment Emma had told her about the shirt, about the girls knowing about Tom, so that Corby could not have invented the mysterioso to cover for him, it felt as if the blood had drained from her.

Had she wanted Tom to be guilty? Was his guilt to be his punishment? Was that the fix that had carried her through these last three days? She shuddered at the reflection in front of her Mirror, mirror on the wall, would that be the weirdest fix of all?

She walked into the shadowy sitting-room and turned on the light. She poured herself a Glenmorangie malt and added

a half-inch of water. Under the light her eyes roamed the carpet.

Looking for stains.

She expelled breath, angry with herself. Tom would be free within an hour. He would come here. Home, Emma had said. She could not be here when he arrived.

She took a mouthful of her drink and phoned enquiries for the number of the Imperial Hotel in Edinburgh.

Tapping out the digits, she ran through her mind what she was going to have to say to Kate by way of apology. A Scottish voice asked her to hold, then Kate herself picked up the phone. 'Claire, darling,' she said. 'I've been trying to call you.'

Claire began to mutter an apology for the accusations at the airport.

'Stop it, Claire,' Kate said firmly. 'If there are apologies to make, it's for me to make them. I just didn't realise how far it had gone with Tom. Listen, the police here have been to see me. They want the tapes of interviews I did with Tom. I told them they are in my safe and I'll be back to open it for them tomorrow morning, first flight. There's nothing in the tapes they don't know already.'

'Katie,' Claire said, 'they're releasing Tom. There'll be no prosecution. They found nothing here. They just don't have the weight of evidence.'

Kate was silent on the other end of the line. 'I'm glad,' she said after a moment. 'So what do the police think now, that it was some passing stranger? Someone she met in a pub last week . . .'

'The mysterioso, as the girls at Corby's school call him? I don't know what the cops think, Katie. I feel so worn out now . . Listen, could I stay at your apartment tonight?'

'Sure . . .' The Irish girl seemed puzzled, then said as she understood: 'Sure, Claire.'

'I can't be here when Tom gets back.'

'Stay at my place,' Kate said. 'Murphy, the porter next door, knows you well enough. He'll let you in.'

'I've got a key here,' Claire said.

'So you have. Okay, I'll be home maybe ten, eleven tomorrow morning. Are you still going to Paris?'

'Yes. Afternoon.'

'You want me to come with you?'

Claire thought of Steven Ross. 'We'll talk about it,' she said. 'Thanks, Katie.'

She put down the phone. Now that there was an alternative she found Old Church Street immediately unbearable. Quickly she shrugged into her denim jacket and ran into the kitchen. The keyboard was to the right of the door. She flipped on the light. A row of keys was labelled 'garden shed', 'office spare', 'back door'. The hook marked 'Kate' was without a key.

Claire frowned Had Kate taken it back for some reason in the last few months?

Maybe.

She switched off the light, walked quickly through to the front hall and picked up her bags, her mind occupied by the irritating prospect of having to walk to her car parked in Cheyne Walk.

'It's good of you to drop by,' Abbeline said. 'What time's your plane back to Paris?' Adam looked at his watch. 'I'm okay for time.' He lifted his head to meet Abbeline's eyes across the desk. 'Your sergeant said it was urgent,' he said.

'They always say that.' Abbeline pushed a pen-set aside

and swept a hand across the desk-top as if he were clearing crumbs. 'I've decided to release your brother, Mr Garrison.'

Adam sat back. 'That's good news. Not the way I thought you were moving this afternoon.'

'No. But we've had some further testimony from one of Corby's friends that brings the mysterioso very much back into perspective. Apparently Corby didn't keep her relations with your brother too close a secret.'

'She told the other girls? Jesus . . .' Adam winced. 'You're saying that since Corby had already told them about Tom, there was no need to invent a mysterioso if it was Tom she was talking about.'

'Exactly.'

'So the guy who was going to take her to Paris is real.'

Abbeline inclined his head. 'He's getting more solid, let's say. Mostly through his connection with Paris.'

Adam waited.

'Let me tell you about the black shirt,' Abbeline said. 'It's got an interesting history.'

'Tell me.'

'Italian silk. A premier Italian make. Sergio Rossini. Label removed.'

'Why was that?'

'Listen. Three hundred of the shirts were made. Destined for Bond Street, Rue de Rivoli, that sort of trade. But on its way from Italy the container truck full of designer clothing was hijacked at an *autoroute* café in Valence. In France,' he added.

'I know Valence is in France, Mr Abbeline. Have any of the shirts turned up, other than the one Corby was wearing?'

'One or two have appeared in cheap markets in Orange, Lyons . . . as far north as Orleans.'

'No sign that they've crossed the Channel? Nothing in London?'

'Nothing outside France. The French police are pretty certain that they're already in Paris, but they just haven't turned them up yet.'

'You asked me to come here to tell me this?'

'Not entirely, no, Mr Garrison. I wanted to ask you one or two questions before you left for Paris. Questions about your own relationship with Corby.'

'Okay.' Adam shifted in his seat, loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. 'Ask your questions,' he said.

'You live in Paris,' Abbeline said slowly, 'a short plane ride from London. But you don't take a lot of advantage of that fact.'

Adam frowned. 'What does that mean, Superintendent? I come to London as often as I need to.'

'Business?'

'I have one or two clients here.'

'But you don't take advantage of your business visits to see your family.'

Adam shook his head slowly. 'No No, I rarely have time.'

'Do you ever have time?'

The American shrugged.

'Have you ever had time, or made time, since your brother and Mrs Garrison, and your sister of course, came to live in London?'

'No.'

'Why is that?'

'Families mean different things to all of us. Some families are closer than others.'

Abbeline leaned his elbows on the desk. 'You don't get on with your brother.'

Adam held his glance. 'No. It's a long time since he was what some people like to call a role model.'

Abbeline nodded. 'And your sister? What was your attitude to Corby?'

'Like any reasonable person's. She was spoilt crazy by Tom. She wasn't a likeable girl.'

'Then you more or less agreed with your sister-in-law, Dr Garrison?'

'Perhaps.'

'There were differences?'

Adam hesitated. 'At one time perhaps.'

'Resolved now?'

Adam frowned.

'Your differences with Dr Garrison. Are they resolved now?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you really stay away from your family in London, Mr Garrison? Was it anything to do with your feelings for your brother's wife, for instance?'

'I don't have to answer that.'

'You don't have to answer anything.' Abbeline pulled the pen-set closer and glanced up at the clock. 'Before you leave to catch your plane, did you ever talk to Corby on the phone? You know, call her up?'

'No.'

'Ever send her presents – birthdays, Christmas?'

'No.

'Ever invite her to Paris?'

'No, Mr Abbeline, never.'

'Not at some time in the last two weeks?'

'Not at some time in the last two weeks Not ever.'

'Did you ever possess a Sergio Rossini black silk shirt,

sir? Buy one in a Paris flea market, for example?'

'I did not.'

'And you never gave any similar shirt to your sister Corby. Or have it stolen from you by her?'

'No, Superintendent.'

'Thank you, Mr Garrison.'

They sat in silence.

'I put all these same questions to your brother this afternoon,' Abbeline said slowly. 'I'm bound to say that he was much more forthcoming with his answers than you've been this evening. But then of course he's not a lawyer, and you are.' Abbeline pressed his hands down flat on the desk and rose from his chair. 'You've got a plane to catch, Mr Garrison. I mustn't keep you any longer.'

'That's where half the troubles of the world come from,' the cab driver said as he pulled up outside the Berkeley Agency in Soho Square. 'The advertising business. If people wasn't bombarded with adverts they wouldn't waste money they haven't got buying goods they don't need. 'Ere, I know you. You're Molly Parkinson.'

'No I play Molly Parkinson. I'm Jo Saunders. And this is not an advertising agency. It's a theatrical agency.'

'Same difference,' the man said coldly. 'That's a fiver on the clock.'

Jo paid the driver and crossed the pavement to take the swing door into reception. The receptionists had long since gone home but a blue-uniformed security man rose from behind the desk on her right.

'I've come to see Philip Rokeby. He's expecting me.'

She was taken up to the third floor by a second security man. In his office at the back of the building, overlooking

the lighted mews, her agent, Philip Rokeby, was waiting for her.

She kissed him on the cheek, accepted his offer of a Scotch and water and waited while he poured. 'What's this all about, Phil?'

'I'm not sure,' he said, 'but it could be one of the nicest little publicity stories we've ever had.'

She sat down and took her Scotch from him. 'Somebody called here, wanting my home number?'

'Which of course I wouldn't give.'

'I should hope not.'

'I told her you'd be here at eight. She should be calling any moment.'

'A woman. What did she want?'

'Great fan of yours, wouldn't speak to anybody else.'

'Okay,' Jo said, slowly. 'About what?'

'About the murdered American girl,' he said triumphantly.

Jo's head jerked up. 'Who said she was murdered?'

'The *Evening Standard* this afternoon.'

'What did this woman want to speak to me about?'

'Take it easy. She has evidence. Apparently her husband was the one who gave the girl a lift.'

'Oh my God.' She was silent. 'But why me?'

'She's a fan I told you. She saw your picture with the flatfoot.'

'Don't call him that.'

'Sorry. The Superintendent in charge of the case,' he said laboriously. 'She thinks Molly Parkinson will give them a fair deal. What d'you think of that?'

'I think it's very sad.'

'Listen, Jo. Sad? It's fantastic. We call the *Standard*. We arrange a meeting with this woman in her little two-up-two-

down somewhere. Molly Parkinson holding her hand as she goes through her husband's shocking story.'

'You bastard,' Jo said, evenly. 'I think you just lost yourself a client.'

The phone rang and Jo grabbed it from under Rokeby's outstretched hand. 'Yes,' she said, 'this is Jo Saunders speaking.'

Murphy, the caretaker, let Claire into Kate's flat, placing her cases in the hall. A five-pound note had miraculously stopped his grumbling.

Closing the door, Claire walked through the rooms thinking how different Kate's taste was to her own. Kate went for a clean, cold, almost minimalist room. Few pictures on the walls, and those mostly bleak, hollow Warhols, mocking the world around him and the patrons and museums who bought his work. Underfoot, a bare minimum of good rugs on sanded and polished Victorian floorboards. The lights were bright and mostly overhead. There was nothing snug or cosy about the way Kate decorated. To Claire, tonight, it was a relief.

She pulled the curtains in the big, bare sitting-room, poured herself a glass of wine and sat down to watch television. An old comedy rerun held her attention for ten minutes. A documentary on the plight of south-west Africa carried away a long, slow half hour. She realised, pouring herself another glass of wine, that she had never spent time alone in Kate's flat before. The whole atmosphere of the apartment, the size of the rooms, the way they were decorated, seemed to echo Kate's own untrammelled dedication to her job. She stood, sipping her wine. There was very definitely nothing warm and comforting about the flat. Worse, it seemed

to have a special chill. She shivered. She was cold, lonely and on edge.

On edge.

As in nervous, she admitted to herself, looking around the room.

Nervous of what, though? Of something here? In this flat? That was absurd. She shrugged her shoulders. Perhaps she'd been more affected than she realised by three days of talk of murder, by seeing Corby's clothes bloodstained on that steel police table . . .

Tired, she decided, just tired.

She took a long bath in Kate's huge bathtub which stood in the middle of the white-tiled bathroom on cast-iron lion's feet, then she climbed into the bed in the spare room and fell asleep within ten minutes, listening to BBC Radio 4.

She was not sure how long she had slept. The sound was echoing strangely through her head and it took her a few seconds to struggle onto one elbow, then to realise that what she was hearing was the chirping of one of Kate's New-Age phones in the sitting-room.

Throwing the red duvet aside, she ran naked into the other room. She had pulled back the curtains before going to bed and the street light illuminated the room sufficiently for her to run straight to the phone.

She picked it up and stood listening. To nothing.

'Hallo, hallo . . who is that?' She was looking out of the window at the street and beyond, the flat, empty river and the red zig-zag reflections of the bridge warning lights.

'Claire . . .' the voice said, very low. 'Oh, Claire . . .' and he laughed a wet, breathy laugh.

'Tom . . . is that you, Tom?' She was close to screaming. She was sure it wasn't Tom. Almost sure it wasn't Tom.

As the line clicked dead her eye settled on a single car parked across from the flat, on the river side of the road. Not a new car. A Ford. A faint movement, and she could just make out the shape of a man's head in the driver's window. Was it possible he had a car phone? As she blinked glistening tears from her eyes, the car began to move forward. Gathering speed, it disappeared from her line of sight.

She stood, naked in the yellow glow within the room, the telephone held tightly to her. The car, she realised, had taken off without lights.

She dropped the phone into the rest, ran into the bedroom to get her housecoat, came back and pulled the curtains and turned on every light in the apartment.

Her heart was thumping against her ribs, a frightening hammering as she stood in the hallway, her eyes on the front door, checking the locks. She leaned forward and shot the bolt then went back into the kitchen.

Think. Someone knew you were there. Someone knew you were at Kate's apartment, followed you there.

She had not recognised the voice. Or the obscene breathiness of the wet laugh. She stood staring at the jar of instant coffee in her hand She had, at that moment, the absolute certainty that the man on the phone was Corby's murderer.

Which meant it wasn't Tom. Unless they had released him in the last couple of hours and he was ringing around to find her. But it wasn't Tom's voice, was it; however drunk, it wasn't Tom's voice? Or was it?

Slowly, very deliberately, she began to make herself coffee. She would then take it into the sitting-room and phone Barnes police. She glanced at the kitchen clock – 3 a.m., the

hour of the wolf, the Russians called it. Death's favourite hour.

She was shaking as she poured milk from a carton, spilt some, enough to run and drip down the black front of the refrigerator door onto the white tiles beside her bare feet.

She took a long drink of the hot coffee, looking for a cloth to wipe up the milk. A kitchen roll was attached to the wall. She tore off a strip, knelt and wiped down the black door. Tore off more and knelt on one knee, using the thick absorbent paper in broad, sweeping movements across the tiles.

She was thinking of the voice, not really concentrating on what she was doing until she banged her knuckles. The dull pain made her look down. Flat-handed now, she swept the kitchen paper across the last small puddles of milk close to the refrigerator door. A pink swirl trailed behind the bunched paper under her hand. She frowned and made another flat-handed, sweeping movement, an inch or two under the door of the refrigerator.

A deep red arc was drawn across the white tiles.

She stopped, rigid with fear, her head turned towards the open door of the kitchen and the corridor to the front door beyond.

A reflex. She had heard nothing. She stood slowly, staring down at the red swirl turning pink at the edges with the milk.

Then frantically she grasped the refrigerator and hauled it out from under the fitted worktop.

On the white tiles a large dry black mark, irregular in shape, trailed off to touch the wall.

Again that certainty, born of fear. The mark was dry blood, the mark was Corby's blood. Corby had been murdered here!

Then doubt. Then North American self-reproaching

scepticism. For God's sake, she couldn't be sure it was blood. And if it was blood, this was a kitchen. And Kate was a cook who carved and stuffed and chopped things. The blood, if it was blood, was very dry, emerging on the tiles only because of the sweeping motion of the wet kitchen paper. Claire took her coffee and walked through into Kate's office. She preferred it to the big sitting-room. It was more conventionally furnished, warmed by the presence of pictures and books. A grey carpet was fitted wall to wall

She sat down at Kate's desk. Her heart was back in step. Her hands, clasped around the big blue breakfast cup, were steady.

Last Sunday night, she said, almost out loud Kate was in Edinburgh, the apartment empty. Was it possible Corby had been here?

The key. The key missing from her own kitchen She could have taken that, run down the road towards Kate's apartment. And let herself in.

Or had Tom followed her down minutes after Claire had slammed out of the house.

Rummaging in drawers, she found a cigarette and lit it. Her first since she was a student. Repelled by the taste, she snatched it from her mouth and ground it out in an ashtray.

Was all this no more than the imaginings of the hour of the wolf?

Maybe Kate had taken her key months ago. There was no real reason to believe Corby was here on Sunday night.

She sat, her eyes resting tiredly on the massive steel front of Kate's safe So many secrets stored in there. Tom's too. Her eyes moved on to the long shelves of audio equipment. So many secrets stored in there too. Every single call in and out was taped and logged on Kate`s recorder. It was utterly

vital, Kate had explained, for a therapist to tape the midnight calls, the long hours of talking to the possessors of depressed, angry or damaged minds. Could it have been one of those, one of Kate's patients, who had woken her just now? Could the voice have been breathing Kate, not Claire?

It seemed more likely.

Claire got up and walked to the rack of black metallic equipment. The recorder was switched on, the red buttons glowing. If she made a call to the police now, it would be recorded. If Corby had made a call from here on Sunday night, likewise it would have been recorded.

She searched along the storage racks. Kate, she knew, had a system by which she checked and wiped the tape if there were no important out-of-hours calls for the week. But most of this week she'd been with Macdonald in Edinburgh. Perhaps she had not had time to check the week's tapes.

Claire lifted one out from a rack of microcassettes. She inhaled quickly: the cassette carried a label with Tuesday's date. It suggested that Kate, under pressure, had indeed had no time to check and wipe the tape. Dating them with a sticky tape label, she had left them ready to be attended to later.

Claire weighed the tiny cassette in her hand. Tuesday. She replaced it. Took another, found it marked Monday, rejected it and picked out the one marked Sunday.

She had to remind herself that there was no real reason to believe that Corby had been here on Sunday, let alone used the phone.

But her heart was beating fast again as she slipped the cassette into a player and pressed the button.

A hollow click preceded the sound of a number being punched out, an almost inaudible ringing tone, a man's voice

announcing Chelsea Cars – and Kate's voice booking herself a cab to take her to the airport at 2.30 p.m. that Sunday afternoon.

The second click preceded Kate's voice giving her professional title, as she always did when you called her, and responding to a man's voice: 'Robbie, I was planning to call you. I have to leave in about half an hour for London Airport . . .'

'Not back to Edinburgh?' the man, Robbie, said, obviously disappointed.

'Strictly business,' Kate insisted. 'Listen, I have some papers to get together before my cab arrives. I'll call you when I get back.'

'Without fail?'

'Without fail.'

Claire reached over for her cup of coffee as the player clicked busily. On the voice-activated recorder there was no way of knowing the time lapse between calls.

A wrong number came next. A German-accented voice offering a courtly apology.

Claire sipped her coffee through the next series of clicks, the sound of dialling, then over it, sudden, as if it was the last thing Claire was expecting, Corby's voice. 'Pizza Trail?' she said.

'Pizza Trail, Hi there,' a young male voice said. 'Do you want me to read off the list or do you have our menu with you?'

'I don't need your card, I know the list by heart, you goon. This is Corby Garrison.'

As she listened to the young, confident voice edged with aggression, Claire thought of the arc of red on the white tiles of the kitchen floor. Of the arc of blood.

'Oh, hi,' the man's voice was saying, 'this is Ken. What can I get you, Corby?'

'Listen, I'm not at home. I'm along the road from Old Church Street. End of Chelsea Embankment. 69 Blantyre Street. Dr Kavanagh's apartment, ground floor. Let me have two mushroom pepperonis, large, okay?'

Claire listened while the boy confirmed the order, rechecked the address and promised delivery in twenty minutes. Two large mushroom pizzas. Claire was staring at the player. Corby had been expecting someone. But who? Tom? Or someone else? Someone she could only envisage in her mind's eye, a shadow of a man's shape with a blank face, the features painted out, unrecognisable as a clown's.

The pizza boy said goodnight and hung up.

And the doorbell rang.

Claire stiffened with fear as she looked towards the door. Who in God's name was here at this time in the morning? Then, as the bell rang again, she came down slightly as she realised the ringing doorbell was on the recording.

She watched, mesmerised by the tiny turning reels of the cassette. The clatter she could hear was the sound of Corby throwing the phone down onto the cradle. But the connection had not been properly broken. She could still hear Corby's footsteps running along the polished board of the hallway towards the front door.

Claire leaned forward, both hands on the desk, until her face was no more than a foot from the cassette player, straining to hear every sound. The doorbell ringing again. Distant sound as Corby opened and closed the door. Then the voice of a man, muffled and indistinct, and Corby's voice, much higher, clearer: 'I've ordered up pizzas. Did you bring

some wine?' And higher. 'You didn't bring any wine? Why not, for Christ's sake.'

Then a change of tone, the voice still coming from the hall but closer to the sitting-room door. Closer to the listening phone. A change of tone as alarm came into the voice. 'What the fuck are you doing? Here, for Christ's sake. Now that's hurting me.' And then real fear: 'Where are we going? What the hell you doing?', the voice rising and fading as they passed the sitting-room door, the man propelling her, carrying her perhaps, towards the kitchen.

Then a scream, partly muffled. And another, so deep and hoarse it seemed barely possible that it was coming from Corby. Then another, running into a whole series of short, yipping screeches, terror-stricken, like a dying fox.

Then silence. Footsteps, the breathing of a man. And a wet, breathy laugh.

Claire snatched up the office phone. To the background sounds of someone lifting, grunting, mopping the kitchen floor, her trembling fingers punched out the number of Barnes police.

17

Meeting in the warm midday sunshine, shaking hands, Adam Garrison and Marc Jacobi crossed the bridge and entered the Belsard brasserie on the Ile St Louis.

Adam Garrison's law firm dealt in the personal security arrangements of senior American industrialists working in Europe. One day he could be handling employment contracts specifying how much a company would pay in the event of a kidnap, perhaps $1 million for a senior executive, up to $5 million for a vice-president; the next month he might be charged with delivering the money after an abduction. Throughout continental Europe there were far more threats or actual cases than ever reached the press.

Jacobi was his principal contact with the Anti-Terrorist Brigade at the Quai des Orfèvres. Son of a prominent Parisian Jewish banking family and a graduate of one of France's *grandes écoles*, Jacobi's choice of career was deliberate and passionate. He was an anti-terrorist officer by conviction. Marc Jacobi was not a man who took a narrow view of the Holocaust.

Ignoring the sunlit tables, they walked through to seats inside the restaurant. Neither had any wish to flaunt their association. The two men sat down and the waiter greeted them with a carafe of red wine. Adam gestured to him to

pour it. 'Abbeline says the silk shirts have turned up in Paris,' he said.

Jacobi nodded. 'They've surfaced here as we thought they would. In fact they arrived in the city not long after the original theft. So let's see what we know about this mysterioso. Perhaps only one thing for certain. That he attached sufficient importance to that shirt to have wanted to dispose of it separately from Corby's body. Why was it important to him? Because it pointed to Paris? Or because he thought it would be possible to trace it to him?'

Adam watched his mind working. 'Either,' he said. 'Both.'

Jacobi drank some wine. 'I don't think we should ignore what the girls from Corby's school say. From the beginning they described the mystery man's intention of taking Corby to Paris to see the paintings of Otto Dix. And true enough, as we've seen, there's an Otto Dix exhibition on in Paris at this moment.'

'Are you ignoring the book of Otto Dix paintings Tom bought Corby?'

'No,' Jacobi said slowly. 'I like the way Abbeline fits that in. He thinks Corby wanted to be *au fait* with the painter before she was taken to the exhibition. He sees the book as a gift bought as a result of Corby asking your brother for it.'

'You're saying that the mystery man exists.'

'It's beginning to look like it. Nothing in the forensic evidence from the apartment where Corby was killed points to your brother. The neighbourly witness has suddenly withdrawn her testimony.' He lifted both hands. 'We're back to the mysterioso.'

'A mysterioso who visits Paris pretty often.'

'Or lives in Paris and visits London often.'

'Could be.'

'I'm interested,' Jacobi said, 'in the details the girls have given in the last few days. Superintendent Abbeline has interviewed Corby's friends again. The girls have dredged up a little more about the mysterious boyfriend. It's always like that. Memories need to be triggered.'

'A schoolgirl imagination at work?'

'Maybe. Maybe not. I think we have to take the details seriously. For instance, one of the girls claims Corby talked about a sort of arts and craft commune the mysterioso said he lived in, here in Paris. Heaven on earth, some might think . . .'

'There are plenty of candidates for arts and crafts communes in the suburbs here.'

'Plenty,' Jacobi said. 'Like political communes they tend to gravitate towards neighbourhoods of what you call project housing. In Paris a good many of these low-price housing blocks have been made vacant by councils planning to tear them down. We in France are recognising our architects' fearsome sins of arrogance.'

Adam poured water for both of them. 'We're talking about dozens, maybe even hundreds of tiny groups living together, splitting up, re-forming . . .' he said. 'It won't be easy to get anywhere with that.'

Jacobi ignored the water and lifted his wine glass, holding it just below the level of his lip. 'Let's accept, for the moment, that he was doing more than just trying to impress impressionable Corby with stories of an arts commune. Let's assume for a moment he did live, at least part-time, the life of a communard. If true it could give some significance to the scraps I've picked up this morning.'

'The shirts in the Paris area.'

'At a market in Meaux, where the mustard is made, east of Paris.'

'No arts and crafts communes in Meaux?'

'Not that I know of. The second appearance was closer to home Some market porters at Rungis, the vegetable market, had got hold of a few of them. The description of the man who sold them fits the description from Meaux, not surprisingly – fat, middle-aged, Provençal accent, driving a beat-up Mercedes.'

'How about the third appearance?'

'More interesting. Just north of the Place de Stalingrad there's a half-empty high-rise area called La Maule.'

'You know the area?'

'We keep an eye on some of the cafés around the Stalingrad metro station. Cheap eating places that entertain a sprinkling of old political lags.'

'And La Maule?'

'The original tenants were rehoused a few months ago. Money to demolish became short and the apartments have been squatted. One or two old Action Directe people have drifted in. A few young and not so young French, Belgians and English with vaguely unsavoury political reputations. They generate a lot of talk about the armed struggle, the sort they all like, an armed struggle against the unarmed. But one or two buildings have been set up as an arts commune.'

The waiter put down a basket of fresh bread.

Jacobi nodded his thanks. 'The bully boys that run the commune like to call themselves faction leaders Applications from Turks and Arabs will not be considered.' He took a piece of bread and broke it in two. 'Marxism and racism were always comfortable bedfellows. More so today '

'And the shirts have turned up there?'

'They run a daily artisanal market. Mostly pretentious junk. One of our snitches bought a few of the shirts. She does batique work – Lili Sabatier – you ever heard of her?'

'Seven years for her part in the abduction of the industrialist, Gerd Schlumpeter.'

'I've never met her myself,' Jacobi said. 'She's run by one of my officers. But she knows my name. Belgian by birth. Semi-educated here at Nanterre. Pushing on past forty now. My lads do her little favours, she does us little favours. She knows everybody up at La Maule. Fucks most of them.'

'Can I meet her?'

'Not in that suit.'

'I'd like to see her.'

'Why would you want to do that?'

'There may be connections the local police don't have the information to make.'

Jacobi nodded thoughtfully. 'Maybe,' he said. His eyes followed a girl with long legs as she walked alone towards a corner table, but his thoughts were on Adam. What propelled him to continue this investigation now that his brother had been released? Certainly not affection for his dead sister, he had made that clear enough many times. What, then? Guilt perhaps? That seemed to be the engine for at least one half of human actions. But then that wasn't the half that was the problem. It was the other half that was so impossibly difficult to sort out. 'She won't talk to you,' Jacobi said. 'But perhaps she'll talk to me.'

They had said very little during the short flight to Paris. From time to time Claire found her eyelids heavy as the engines droned, and she would find herself standing in Kate's office again, listening to the recording, listening to Corby being

put to death. She found that, worse even than the screams, the softly insistent thump, thump as the killer mopped down the kitchen floor repeated itself, like a heartbeat, in her mind.

As they began to lose height, she looked at Steven Ross and smiled wanly. On her lap was an *Evening Standard* with a front page mostly devoted to Tom's release, another picture of Corby, and a further appeal to anybody who saw her hitch-hiking on Sunday night. She put it aside. Through a gap in the cloud, she could see Paris below.

The landing, the collecting of hand baggage, the shuffle down the aircraft to the door, all served to ease the images of the night before to the back of her mind. They rode the satellite travelator into the central reservation at Charles de Gaulle, went to a coffee bar and stood for a few minutes drinking strong black coffee. 'I've got to throw this off,' Claire said. 'A few hours ago it seemed to me that Corby's death had still not really affected me. As if it hadn't really penetrated my defences. But being in Kate's apartment . . . hearing it . . .'

He reached over and touched her hand. 'We're in Paris,' he said, 'though looking around here it could as easily be Birmingham or Miami. But it's Paris and a short cab ride from here there's the Champs Elysées and the Quai d'Orsay and Café Lipp and the Dôme and a whole new life a long way from what's been happening to you in London. Do you think you can face it?'

'I have to see Adam first. I promised him.'

He looked at her. 'You won't commit yourself to dinner with your brother-in-law?'

'I like it,' she said, smiling. 'For the first time you looked anxious.'

* * *

In Briden's room at the Barnes police building Jo sat with Abbeline. It was the first time she had seen him at work. She found it strange to hear him called 'sir' all the time. Slightly unsettling. She smiled across the desk, in need of reassurance. 'She said they'd definitely decide today,' Jo said apologetically. 'She wouldn't give a name. All I could do was to tell her how important it was.'

He came round the desk and kissed her lightly on the cheek. 'You couldn't have done anything more. Police work's often like this – a breakthrough hanging on a thread.'

Ten minutes later, when the phone rang, George Briden was already at the door before Jo picked up the receiver. 'It's her,' he said.

Jo held the phone tightly. 'I'm going to pass you over to Mr Abbeline,' she said. 'You can trust him to do all he can to keep your husband's name out of the press. Just tell him exactly what worries you about coming forward.'

Abbeline took the phone and introduced himself. For a few moments he listened to the woman at the other end. 'I can understand your worries,' he said. 'But I'd like to tell you how important your husband's testimony might be. We've released the man who was helping us with our enquiries. At this moment, I'm being absolutely honest with you when I say we don't have the first idea of who committed this appalling killing. All we know is one thing. He will almost certainly strike again. Everything points to that. The way I see it,' he said, his voice low, 'you and your husband are the only people who stand between the killer and a second victim. That's what I'd like you to think about. Somewhere, some young woman doesn't know it yet, but she's counting entirely on you.'

A few words, a click from the other end of the line and

Abbeline slowly replaced the receiver.

'You were marvellous,' Jo said softly. Tears welled up in her eyes. 'If that doesn't persuade her . . .'

The door opened and George Briden said: 'Public call box. Hammersmith Broadway, sir. She'll be away before we get there.'

'Thanks, George.' Abbeline turned to Jo. 'She still didn't give a name but she says she and her husband will come here to make a statement when he gets back from work.'

'Will she?'

Abbeline pushed his hands into his pockets. He took a deep breath. 'Maybe.'

In the northern Paris suburbs it was raining. The broken slate roofs of long-abandoned enterprises in the old industrial district behind Stalingrad metro streamed water; the forlorn grey back streets were all but empty. Between the double line of cast-iron columns that carried the railway across the canal a small flea market of old clothes and new craftwork had been set up. On trestle tables were arranged piles of old clothes, woven rush baskets, carved wooden lampstands, plaster-cast gnomes, papier-mâché trays, second-hand shoes, arrangements of dried flowers, paperback books and old 78 discs. Business was less than brisk.

Traders stood behind their stalls and watched the rain fall; a few people sheltered, their backs to the market, glancing up at the leaden sky. From time to time an old couple or the hunched figure of an Arab worker drifted past the line of stalls and out into the rain along the canalside. At the end stall Lili Sabatier picked morosely over her batique pieces.

In the Café des Sports opposite, Jacobi stood among the afternoon drinkers watching the horse-racing at Longchamps

on the forty-centimetre screen in the corner. From his position he could see out one way across the canal, to the concrete apron in front of the tower blocks, and through the other window to the flea market.

The middle-aged woman with dyed hair and a bruise under her eye leaned on her elbow on the bar, studying him. 'This isn't your part of town,' she said after a moment.

'I'm getting a feel for it,' he told her.

'I've been watching you,' she said. 'I like your leather jacket.'

He nodded. Across the distance of fifty yards or so he watched Lili Sabatier light a cigarette and wondered how he should best approach her.

'I had you sized up from the moment you walked in,' she said, nodding, pleased with herself. 'You can get anything you fancy, this part of town.'

He drank his beer as if he were about to go.

'What's your hurry?' She shuffled her shoulders like an old parrot. 'Anything you fancy,' she said. 'I live just over there.' He followed her glance across the canal to the concrete blocks, their windows mostly boarded or smashed on the lower floors. 'Officially, it's condemned,' the woman said 'It's the faction leaders that run it. Strict rules. The commune decides who lives there, who don't. One thing, though, they keep the Arabs out.'

'Strict entry rules.'

She laughed. 'It's a craft commune. We've got the Toy Man, the Label Man, the Carpet Lady, the Plaster Lady . . . dozens of them. You're supposed to do something with your hands.' Amusement bubbled up in her. 'I do, I told them . . .' She shrieked with laughter . . . 'these days it's all too dangerous to do anything else.' She drank her pastis. 'No, I

tell the faction leaders I make rag dolls. I buy a few off a stall, pull them apart a bit, leave them hanging around my hovel. The Cabbage Doll Lady they call me now.'

'Does anybody believe you?'

'God knows. Do you want to do business?

He nodded. 'Do you know that girl over there – Lili?' He pointed towards the market.

The woman frowned. 'The batique lady. Belgian girl. The stall on the end there. What's your interest?'

'Not a bad-looking woman.'

She sniffed.

He held a two-hundred-franc note low between them.

She giggled and pressed herself forward. 'What's that I can feel moving down there? Something nice, am I right?'

'Go across the road,' he said. 'Look through Lili's merchandise. When there's nobody else around, tell her to meet me, a friend of Jaco's, under the canal bridge. Fifteen minutes.'

The rain had stopped by the time Jacobi left the Café des Sports and walked through the market and along the canal. By the time he reached the bridge, the sun, emerging from behind the long streaks of purple cloud, was hot on his back. Wisps of steam rose from the abandoned mattress on the towpath. For a few minutes he stood, watching the garbage floating, lifeless in the still water.

At a sound he turned. A hundred yards away, towards the railway bridge, Lili Sabatier slithered down the muddy bank onto the towpath, glanced about her and, both hands in her jacket pockets, ran forward to where he stood. She stopped in front of him. 'A friend of Jacobi's. That's what the old hooker said.'

He nodded.

'How do I know?'

'You do favours for each other.'

'Name one.'

'How about cherry cakes for the boyfriend in Montpellier?'

'Okay.' She relaxed. 'What is it you want?'

She was in her early forties – one of those faces that develop deep lines rather than a mass of wrinkles. A yellow bruise around the mouth. Dark blonde hair. Shabby-chic dresser. Tobacco-stained fingers. 'Jacobi said you might be able to help,' he said.

She swung her shoulder bag off her hip and delved inside Her hand came out with tobacco pouch and papers.

'They tell me you're Belgian,' he said while she rolled.

'Belgian,' she said wearily. 'Born Liège forty-two years ago of a long line of dentists. Educated at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. University degree in Awareness Studies at Nanterre, Paris. Unmarried. One child. One conviction. One sentence: seven years, served five.' She paused. 'You knew all that.'

He nodded. He could see the grey in her hair as she bent to lick the gummed strip. She lit her cigarette. 'My man's in jail. Twenty years. Served six so far. Jacobi's promised me he could be out in two or three. Meanwhile I cook him up cherry cakes laced with hash and no questions asked. It's favours for favours. That's how the world goes round.'

Jacobi nodded. If he had his way the boyfriend would stay inside for life. 'Give a little, take a little,' he said.

She looked down at the towpath. 'What do you want to know about?'

'Some shirts. Black silk.'

Her lips pursed. 'The local lads have been asking about

them. I thought those shirts spelt trouble. But not from Jacobi's people. This is street-corner stuff.'

'There's no trouble coming your way. Not from Jacobi.'

'But what you want to know is where I got them from?'

'No. I want to know how many you had, what you did with them.'

'Well, I didn't dye them. They were no good for batique work. I had them on my stall until the police took them this morning.'

'Had you sold any?'

She pulled a face 'An Arab woman bought two yesterday. The rest just sat there. Nobody believes they're silk. Who is it you're looking for?'

'A man. Maybe an artist. Maybe English. Maybe thirty to forty. Maybe lives in the neighbourhood.'

'And maybe got two balls and one cock, huh?' She laughed. 'Should be easy.'

'He would have been in London last week.'

'You've got nothing to go on at all. This is a police word-fit. I've heard a thousand of them. Does this man actually exist? Do you know that for certain?'

'Not for certain, no.'

'I thought so. I'm getting back to my stall.'

'Jacobi says you could earn a lot of brownie points for this one.'

She had started moving away but she turned, her long paisley skirt swirling. 'Jacobi himself said that?'

He nodded.

'I don't see what I can do.'

'Your choice, Lili.'

'There's no fucking choice when your man's in jail. Do

you think I'd deal with creepy sub-humans like you from choice?'

'Watch your language,' he said. 'It has an unfortunate history.'

She grimaced.

'Where did you get the shirts?'

She puffed hard on her near-extinguished cigarette, looked at the tip, scowled and flicked it into the canal. 'I'm not going to tell you that, am I? I'm going to make up some story . . .'

'Tell the local flics what you like, but there's no trouble for the supplier either. Not from us. That's a promise from Jacobi.'

'I'd like to meet Jacobi in person some time,' she said casually.

'I expect that could be arranged. Where did the shirts come from.'

'A friend of mine.'

'Named?'

'Prinz.'

'What does Prinz do?'

'He fucks, monsieur. I have German Prinz to get laid. Do I have to spell it out to you? Your friends put my man in a concrete box for twenty years.'

He let the waves of self-pity wash towards him.

'Is Prinz an artist?'

'A mechanic. But he picks up on ideas. He likes to think he's educated.'

'Speaks English well?'

'He's no interest to you. He's not serious enough.'

'Maybe. But I think I'd still like to meet German Prinz.'

'No chance,' she said. 'If he saw you he'd run a mile.'

'Why would he do that.'

'Authority. He recognises it even when it wears a soft leather jacket and six hours of designer beard.'

'Maybe you could talk to him for me. Play me in.'

She shook her head slowly from side to side. 'Let me tell you a story about Prinz.' He looked at her stained fingers and broken nails as she rolled another cigarette. He knew not to hurry her.

'I saw Prinz last night,' she said. 'He was dropping me off a few bolts of cloth, he does that for me, and I asked him to stay over ' She drew hard on the cigarette. 'That was okay with him. We drank a few beers and smoked, everything was running okay. Like we're good friends, you know?'

He nodded.

'Okay, we move into the bed. We're still drinking the beers, you know, just fooling around. He starts talking. Talking about this work he's doing he really likes.'

Jacobi waited.

'It's a ten-year-old VW camper Prinz is bolting it on a brand-new chassis. Putting in an Audi engine, grip tyres, everything. But the outside has to stay battered, just as it was. Real old jalopy. Can you imagine?'

'What is it? Armed hold-up? Getaway car?'

'That sort of thing. Listen to the story I'm telling you. Give you some idea of Prinz. Show you I'm fucking desperate.' She took a deep breath. 'Last night I'm with Prinz. Nice young guy. But I'm drunk homesick for my man in Montpellier. I listen to his story about the VW camper and I say to Prinz I know where a little titbit like that would buy us a couple of weeks in the south. I'm thinking of Jacobi. And I'm thinking I've got a visit owing to Montpellier.'

'What did Prinz say to that?'

'He hits the roof. Jesus, does he hit the roof! And gives

me a belt across the mouth that rattles my teeth. Another shot to the ribs so I can hardly breathe. By the time I can see straight he's falling out of bed, pulling on his clothes, yelling what the hell do I think I'm talking about. Prinz is out of his wits. He's young, only nineteen . . .'

'He knows you talk to the cops?'

'Jesus, no. Nobody knows that. He thought I just had the idea. He tells me I go on like this I'll get one of us killed. So he's not going to talk to you. About silk shirts or anything else.' She looked sullen, big eyes staring up at him through greying strands of hair.

'Do you know how many of the shirts Prinz had?'

'No. Not many.'

'You know anyone else he sold them to?'

'He didn't have selling numbers. He let me have some, probably kept a couple for himself.'

'He wore one.'

'He was wearing one round at my place.'

'D'you know where to find Prinz, Lili?'

She dragged on her cigarette.

'Face it, Lili, if you want to get any credit for your man it's going to be with the help of Jacobi. Do you know where Prinz lives?'

'You think this is important, huh?'

'I think this could be very, very important to Jacobi, Lili More than you know right now.'

She thought a few seconds then nodded. 'I think I know more or less where he works. A garage somewhere off the Boulevard St Denis.'

'You've been there?'

She shook her head.

He turned away and walked to the canal bank, staring

down into the water. 'You've got to do better that this, Lili,' he said, turning to face her.

'It's off the big boulevard, on the left there,' she said. 'That's all I know.'

'We'll take a ride round. You needn't be seen.'

'What will happen to Prinz?'

'Maybe not a lot. He hasn't done anything yet, has he?'

She flicked her roll-up into the canal. 'I hate these fucking deals,' she said. 'It's never us that comes off best.'

Jacobi nodded soberly. 'My car's in the street behind the Café des Sports. A black Citroën.'

'You're going to have to tell Jacobi this won't come cheap,' she said with a last show of hopeless defiance.

18

Jack Abbeline, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, chopped garlic and parsley and mixed them with walnut oil. In the small kitchen, his father drew his wheelchair closer, a frown on his heavy features.

'Walnut oil?' he said. 'Walnut oil?'

His son lifted the salad bowl and inhaled deeply. 'With green salad it's better than olive oil. And good for you. You find fewer heart attacks in south-west France than anywhere in Europe.'

'And that's down to walnut oil?'

'Or roast goose or duck or gallons of red wine.' He cracked four eggs into a bowl. 'They haven't tracked it down yet.'

'It's good of you to come over, son,' George Abbeline said, 'knowing how busy you are.'

'I'm looking for a few tips.' Abbeline poured the dressing over the salad and smiled as his father winced.

'So you've let him go. You've let Garrison go?' George mused over the words.

His son nodded. 'I've not got enough to hold him.'

'I was against you picking him up in the first place.' George Abbeline's heavy hands spun one wheel, slowed the other, bringing the chair round to a new position from where he could see his son's face. 'This isn't a domestic,' he said. 'A woman kills her husband, a kitchen knife's in order. A

man kills his wife – or sister is what you're saying here – and he strangles her.'

'You don't see this as a straight sex murder?' Abbeline poured the eggs into a frying pan.

His father shook his head so vigorously that his chair banged against the kitchen cupboards. 'On the evidence of your schoolgirls, your ferret sought her out. He was looking for her. Now why, is what you have to ask yourself.'

'I have – a thousand times.'

'Okay, Jack – try this: the ferret's eyes are set somewhere else. He's cautious, thinks himself clever and calculating. Enjoys planning. Picks up Corby. Gets what he wants from her. Now think of the tape. Think of the killing. This bloody ferret didn't have a blood-lust on. He killed Corby because he had to. Maybe she knew too much about him . . .' He stared at his son. 'You're not half-way through this case, Jack.'

'You're talking about Claire Garrison.'

'Exactly.'

'You're saying somewhere along the road, Claire Garrison is the target.'

'I've got an uneasy feeling . . .'

'So have I.' Abbeline put the omelettes and salad on the kitchen table. He took a bottle of wine from the bag he had brought, and opened and poured it into two glasses while his father manoeuvred his chair into place.

'I offered protection. But she's on her way to Paris.' He checked his watch. 'There by now. I've talked to a friend of mine there – he's trying to arrange something. But it's a pretty flimsy basis to commit round-the-clock surveillance.' He sat opposite his father, rapidly cutting and eating his omelette with his fork.

'You'll choke, you eat that fast.'

Abbeline smiled and took up his glass. 'I don't have a lot of time,' he said.

'Maybe this woman who contacted Jo, maybe she and her husband'll turn up.'

'Maybe. She said they would. This evening, when her husband got back.' He looked at his watch again 'I must get a move on.'

His father lifted a forkful of omelette to his mouth and paused. 'You haven't seen anything of your mother?' he asked, with a transparent casualness.

Jack Abbeline nodded. 'Here and there,' he said. He drank a gulp of wine. 'This is good. Bit heavy on the fruit, but good.'

'Does she call round to your place?'

'Sometimes. Not often.'

'What's she up to?'

Abbeline shrugged. 'The usual. Racketing around.'

'What's that mean?'

Abbeline looked towards the picture of a young woman on the sideboard. 'She doesn't look like that anymore.'

'I don't expect her to. That was over twenty-five years ago.'

Abbeline poured himself another half a glass of wine and sipped it slowly. 'She looks pretty rough now. No place of her own. Still drinking. She's dropped out, Dad. She's past pulling back. There's nothing we can do. Nothing she wants us to do.'

His father's heavy eyebrows came together as if he were making a new decision. 'Tell her to come here,' he said.

Abbeline shook his head. 'You've tried that.'

'I don't mind giving it another go.'

'She'll bleed you dry, Dad. And bugger off without a word of thanks. You know that.'

His father turned his attention back to his omelette. 'Maybe,' he said. 'Maybe you're right.'

Abbeline finished his wine and stood up. 'If George Briden calls, tell him I'm on my way back to Barnes.' He stood, rolling down the sleeves of his shirt and buttoning the cuffs.

'Best of luck with your ferret, son.' George Abbeline swung his chair from the table. 'It could be this Joseph Midasov he's after,' he said, wagging his head from side to side. 'It could be he sees Claire as the way to get to her old man. Have you thought about that?'

Abbeline took his suit jacket from the back of the door. 'Eat up your walnut salad,' he said. 'Yuh, I've thought about it – but I think I'll think about it some more.'

The man from the art gallery on Paris's Rue Duquesne wore a dark suit, a cravat and white gloves. He carried the three paintings, each wrapped in brown paper, with exaggerated care. 'There are two more to come, Monsieur,' he said, impressed by anybody who could afford a room in the Hotel Crillon, let alone a suite of this grandeur.

The tall, thin-shouldered old man leaned on the back of a chair. 'Open 'em up,' he said.

A gilt table ran along the wall just inside the suite. Watched by Joseph Midasov the young man placed the pictures on the table and began to remove their wrappers. Bending carefully, he stood each canvas along the wall to be viewed.

Smoking a cigar, the old man stood in the middle of the room staring at the paintings. It was impossible to say what

was going through his mind. The grey eyes, their clarity emphasised by the walnut depth of colour of his skin, stared for long periods without blinking as the paintings were revealed. The gallery assistant was too intimidated by the man's manner to hazard a comment on these bleak scenes of prison camps in the snow. Perhaps they had a certain primitive vigour. Perhaps. Certainly they were very different from the abstract Expressionists the gallery was normally commissioned to acquire for him.

Midas looked at his watch. Another fifteen minutes before Claire was due. She was seldom late. Or early.

The old man glanced at himself in the mirror over the buffet. Last time his daughter had told him he was looking his age. Eighty-two. His long lipline turned down. The hair was there, grey, thin now on his skull, but still there. The lines were as unobtrusive as discreet surgery once every three or four years allowed. He shook his head irritably. Anybody who had spent the years he had spent in a place like Brogula Strict Regime camp was lucky to look as he looked.

There was a knock on the door. 'My colleague with the other paintings,' the man from the art gallery said.

'Let him in,' Midas said, and turned from the mirror to face his daughter, Claire, entering the suite.

She was wearing a cream linen suit and heeled sandals. He nodded approvingly. She was as beautiful, tall, long-legged as her mother had been. And happily far more intelligent. As a student she had worn student uniform – jeans and sneakers and thick, lumpy sweaters Only in the last few years had she begun to dress really differently. Now, at least sometimes, she looked like the daughter of a rich man. 'Come in, kitten, come in,' he said.

She kissed him on the cheek then held him at arms' length,

studying him. 'You look well, Midas,' she said after a moment.

From an early age he had insisted she call him Midas, as everyone else did But it was an insistence he half regretted now. Perhaps now he would have preferred something that more uniquely recognised their relationship. 'And you, kitten?' his voice rumbled. 'How are you coping with these appalling events?'

He gestured her to a chair. To the man from the art gallery he said, barely glancing at him, 'You can go now. Leave the other pictures until later.' He waited till the man had closed the door after him. 'Do you believe he's guilty?'

'Of murder? No. The police have released him.'

'The rest you believe.'

'I believe he was another of Corby's victims,' she said. 'Like his father.' She paused regretting what she had said. She might have said that yesterday without remorse. After hearing the tape of Corby's death, everything had changed. 'I shouldn't have said that. Can I have a drink?'

'I've some fine champagne for us,' he said.

Claire sat down. She thought what a strange, contradictory character her father was. He knew she never drank champagne. But he liked to produce it as a challenge. He would give her anything she asked. But on an issue he would never concede. Never surrender. Never admit defeat. She shrugged, unwilling to waste time fighting.

'It's a vintage Krug,' he said.

'I wouldn't know the difference from sparkling apple juice.'

He twisted the cork with his great, bony hands, poured a glass of champagne, sipped it, rolled it round his tongue and nodded approval. 'You'll like this, though,' he said. He

poured another glass and handed it to her.

She took the champagne, her eyes on the paintings propped against the wall. 'There's something there,' she said. 'Some of the bleakness, the absence of hope.'

'Perhaps.' Midas began to collect up the pictures

'Where is that camp? Is it just any camp? Every camp?'

He lifted one of the paintings and studied the string of perimeter lights, the outline of the hills in the background, the construction crudely hammered into place by the two watchtowers. 'They're not very good,' he said.

'But you know the camp.'

He nodded.

'It's not Brogula, is it?'

'It's Brogula.'

'Is that why you bought them?'

'Why else? The paintings themselves are no more than workmanlike. There's no real spark there.'

'What will you do with them? Send them to the Midas Foundation?'

'You must learn to distinguish between history and sentiment, kitten. These are interesting to me. But they're not a historical record.'

Looking at the paintings she could feel something. 'I find the detail frightening,' she said. Her eyes were on a summer scene, a group of three prisoners, *zeks*, in their broad striped trousers and jacket, the striped, peakless cap on their shaved heads. 'I suppose it's the knowledge that you were there.' She paused. 'You've written so much about the system, so little about your own experiences.'

'I'm a historian, not a novelist. I'm Joseph Midasov, not Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. Before I die I want the Soviet camp system recognised for what it was, a unique historical

moment of barbarity, its victims countable not just in the hundreds of thousands who died in the camps . . .' He stopped. 'But these are old chimes. Old men should beware of repeating themselves. My own experiences are unimportant. Many died. I survived.'

His face was set. He seemed almost angry that she had not shared the experience. She had noticed this on rare occasions in the past when the labour camps were mentioned by one of his business colleagues or a friend of the family. His anger. A feeling almost of contempt for those who had not known what it was like. Contempt for those who had lived a life of American ease. Contempt and a desire to turn off the subject like a tap that dripped.

'We should be talking of the things that are happening to you.'

'Like you, Midas, I find that difficult.'

'Why did they release him? Diplomatic pressure?'

'Lack of evidence.'

He shrugged, suggesting an error on the part of the police. She felt no wish to recount to him the night at Kate's apartment. 'There are still gaps to fill,' she said. 'The police haven't yet established Corby's movements the night she was killed.'

'Hitch-hiked from school?'

'Very likely. But why hasn't the driver who gave her a lift come forward?'

He twisted his lips. 'The man has a wife or girlfriend. He's not happy about admitting he picks up nubile young girls.'

'That's what the police think.'

Midas made a gesture of satisfaction. 'And Adam Garrison, has he appeared on the scene?'

'He came to London,' she said. 'He's back in Paris now.'

Midas nodded and stood for a moment looking down at her. 'What will you do, kitten?'

'One thing I certainly won't do is stand by Tom in the time-honoured wife's role. Whatever happens to Tom now, my marriage is finished.'

'And his own career prospects.' Midas grimaced. 'And I suppose I shall be swamped in publicity.'

Claire shrugged, irritated at the speed with which Midas turned all considerations into his own.

He noticed. 'Selfish old man, you think your father is. Perhaps. I've talked to my French publishers and persuaded them to delay publication of the book. This weekend there'll be more column inches published on me because my son-in-law was charged with murder than there will be on my book. My publisher here agrees.'

'Will you go straight back to New York?'

'No, I'm leaving for the island tomorrow,' Midas said. He faced her, looking more cheerful. 'I've got together a quite interesting house party. None of the Foundation crowd. Some young film people. Madeleine Dassault's coming down.'

'Your new girlfriend?'

He grimaced. 'Unfortunately not. Or not yet. I know some important people in the film business, though. That might prove persuasive.' He paused, musing. 'You can stay in the suite here tonight. We'll leave for the island tomorrow morning.'

'Wait a minute,' she said. 'I haven't said I'm going down to the island.'

His face was cold. 'I don't understand you, kitten,' he said. 'You're in Paris to see your father. To be here when

his book is published. That's now been unavoidably postponed. Why should you not accompany me to the island?'

She stood before him, fourteen years old again. 'Now listen, Midas, I don't want to fight.' She could feel the tears welling in her eyes.

'Then it's settled. Have your things moved over from the Belvedere. We'll have dinner together here and leave tomorrow. I've arranged a private flight for us.'

She stood for a moment staring out at the patches of blue sky. He had got up and gone into one of the other rooms, knowing she needed time alone to absorb her defeat. Why had she never been able to stand up to him, she wondered? And even as she asked the question she knew the answer. She had never stood up to him because it was inconceivable to her to do so. To stand against her father. Against Midas.

When he came back into the room he was smoking a cigar. 'We'll dress for dinner, I think,' he said, radiating bonhomie. 'Now shouldn't you be making some arrangements with the Belvedere?'

'I have something to ask you,' Claire said, standing.

'A favour, kitten?' He loved to grant favours, especially after administering a defeat.

'Not a favour,' she said, walking to the window. Below her she watched the Paris traffic moving down the boulevard. 'It's a question. About the past.'

'My past?' His smile had a sudden touch of savage derision.

'No.' She paused, turning from the window. 'I've met someone,' she said. 'A man of about my age, four or five years older maybe.'

'You're having an affair with him?'

'No.'

'But he's more than just a friend.'

'I think so.'

'Do I know him?'

'I'd hoped you might. I have a strong sense of having known him before.'

'In a past life?' He put his head to one side.

'Be serious,' she said.

'All right. But, kitten, if you're attracted to someone it's not unusual to feel you might have known them in the past. You want to go to bed with him. It's that simple.'

She ignored him. 'Steven Ross. That means nothing to you?'

He shook his head, suddenly bored. 'English?'

'American. He spent some of the early years of his life at Brighton Beach.'

Midas lifted his eyebrows, slightly more interested.

'It's where you first lived when you arrived in America, isn't it?'

'Unforgettably,' he said. 'That boardwalk saw more dealing done than the New York stock exchange.'

'You took me back there a few times when we lived in New Haven.'

He nodded. 'Until my new prosperity excited more envy than admiration. I stopped going back after a while.'

'Could I have met this boy then? The child of one of your friends?'

'Perhaps.' He shrugged, his cigar held above shoulder height. 'Are his parents ex-Soviets?'

'Steven's mother was Russian. An immigrant. She went mad, was committed to a mental institution.'

Was she making it up? She was almost sure she saw a

faint shock-wave, the head jerk back, the thin, square shoulders reset themselves.

'I don't remember any family named Ross,' he said carefully. 'You're not drinking your champagne.'

'I don't enjoy champagne,' she said.

He transferred his glass to his other hand and licked away a bubble of champagne on his lean brown wrist. 'Then pour yourself some malt,' he said shortly. 'There's a bottle of Glenmorangie there. I know you prefer it, of course.'

She walked across to where a drinks tray had been set out on the sideboard. She poured a glass of Glenmorangie and came back with it to stand in the middle of the room. 'Do you know this woman, Midas?'

'I've known a lot of women, Claire. What was her first name?'

'I never asked.'

He shrugged. 'What else do you know about her, apart from the fact that she was committed to a State mental institution?'

Claire shook her head. 'The Children's Department – I guess that would have been in New York – took her son into care when his mother was committed. He lost touch with her after that.'

He strode back and forth across the room. 'A lot of people came from the Soviet Union to Brighton Beach,' he said. 'In the fifties and sixties they fought their way across deserts or frozen wastes, they stowed away in boats and airplanes, begged, borrowed, stole to get to freedom.' He gave a snort of laughter. 'They never, of course, imagined that freedom would look anything like Brighton Beach.' He stopped before her. 'It affected many of them badly. Your friend's mother, I'm sad to say, would not have been alone.'

'You didn't know anyone like her?'

'I knew a lot of people like her.'

'But not her?'

'No, not her, kitten.'

They had cruised the boulevard St Denis for almost two hours asking for local garages, threading their way through a skein of back streets.

'We'll find it,' Jacobi told Lili calmly. 'We'll find it in the end.'

For a few moments they were silent as they ran along a narrow road parallel to the boulevard. Cars and vans were angled high onto the sidewalk, but there was still barely room for two cars to pass. 'How long have you known Prinz?' Jacobi asked, his eyes flicking from side to side of the narrow road.

'He's new,' she said. 'I told you, less than a couple of months.'

'How did you meet him? At your market?'

'He came looking around. Liked what he saw.'

'What was he doing down that way?'

'I never thought to ask. He was the fastest draw I ever met. We were literally upstairs balling within ten minutes. I had to get the Toy Man to keep an eye on my stock.'

Jacobi followed the road round to the right. 'And after, he mostly came to you?'

'If he had business at the commune, he'd come. If not I wouldn't see him.'

'What sort of business?'

'You don't ask. Everybody there's dealing in something. Drugs, videos, porn . . . there's not many just do their own thing.'

'Could the man he's working for on the VW be at the commune?'

'Could be. But Prinz could just as easily be selling cut-price tyres he'd lifted from his garage. Everybody has to make their way. The view from this part of town's not the same as from yours.'

Jacobi pulled the Citroën to the kerb. Thirty yards down the street two lines of priced used cars occupied a garage forecourt. 'What do you think?' he asked her.

'It looks more like it than the others.' Lili had slid deep down in her seat so that she was looking across at the garage on a line with the Citroen's bonnet. 'I told you. I've only seen it at night. No cars outside. It's a nondescript sort of place.'

'There's someone coming out.'

They watched a man in blue overalls leave the garage and head for the nearest used car. Jacobi looked at her.

'It's not him. About the same age, but it's not Prinz.'

'Same height? Same colouring?'

'Prinz is taller. Reddish fair hair with a moustache.'

Jacobi opened the door. 'Okay. I'll be back.'

He let himself out and slammed the door. Crossing the street, he walked towards the forecourt. The young man in overalls had climbed into one of the used cars and was backing it into the garage. Jacobi followed him in 'I'm looking for Prinz,' he said as the young man got out of the car.

'Prinz left this evening.'

'Left?'

'Collected his money and quit. What's wrong, did he owe you?'

Jacobi nodded. 'Where did he go?'

'Pissed if I know. Said he wouldn't be back.'

'He take his old camper?'

'The VW?' The boy nodded.

'How long had he worked here?'

'A month. My uncle owns the place. He said Prinz was a drifter the day he took him on. But Prinz knew his stuff and we were short-handed, you know how it is.'

Jacobi thanked him and went back to the car. Sliding behind the wheel he looked down at Lili. 'You can sit up,' he said. 'Prinz just beat it.'

'So there's nothing for me in this.'

'It doesn't look like it.'

'There was one thing I was holding back.'

'Let's hear it.'

'You'll remember it was me who gave it to you.'

He nodded.

'In Prinz's camper, it wasn't just a new engine he was fitting. He had things to do in the back too . . .'

'What sort of things?'

'He had to weld in a gadget. A metal gadget in the back of the van.'

'What sort of gadget?'

'Prinz said it was wild. It had three holes in it, like for neck and arms. Prinz said it looked like medieval village stocks.'

19

In the Special Branch office at Barnes, Detective-Inspector George Briden looked out again over the darkening car park then checked his watch.

'You're making me nervous, George,' Abbeline said. 'Play the tape.'

They had already listened to it a dozen times. Briden pressed the play button and the machine clicked. From the silence came Corby's footsteps and the sound of the opening door. Staring down at the tiny cassette and the reeling tape, the two men again heard Corby Garrison being murdered.

At the thumping of the mop across the kitchen floor, Abbeline turned off the tape. 'She was expecting him, pizzas ordered,' he said. 'But the ferret came with one purpose. To kill her.'

'What do we get from the fact that she chose Kate Kavanagh's flat?' Briden said.

'First, whoever he is, he doesn't have a place of his own he wants to use. Or maybe not a place of his own in London.'

They were silent for a moment, 'Pizzas,' Abbeline said. 'What did the kid who made the delivery say exactly?'

'He says he was there approximately fifteen minutes after Corby gave him the order. Lights on. Curtains drawn back. But no answer to the bell. He rang several times. Gave it up.'

'So our ferret was in there,' Abbeline said. 'He was in there with the body.'

In the car park of Barnes police station a white Cavalier came to a halt. Harry Bathgate looked at his wife in the passenger seat.

'We're doing the right thing, Ella. Whatever anybody says from now on, we know we're doing the right thing.'

She sat, looking ahead. 'Mr Abbeline said we're all that stands between the man that did it and some other girl.'

'I believe that,' Harry said. 'I swear I wouldn't have come if they'd charged the brother with murder.'

'I know we've got to help if we can, but you're quite sure, Harry . . .' Her hands were clutching and loosening on her handbag. 'You're quite sure that what you've got to tell them is worth all this.'

'She spelt it out, exactly where she wanted to go,' he said. 'Next to the launderette. I can lead them to it, Ella. I'm the only one who can.'

Her mouth opened to say something, closed again. 'Let's go in, Harry,' she said. 'Let's get it over with.'

In the office overlooking the car park George Briden glanced down from the window at the white Cavalier which had parked in the section reserved for patrol cars. He turned to tell Abbeline that there were two people sitting in the car park, forced himself not to, and instead memorised the number in case they drove off.

'What are you looking at down there, George?'

'Nothing sir.' He turned back to Abbeline. 'What do you make of Mrs Garrison's story about a phone call in the middle of the night, sir?'

Abbeline swivelled in Briden's desk chair. 'It could have been her husband of course. Found she wasn't at Old Church

Street when we released him. Noticed Dr Kavanagh's key no longer on their kitchen keyboard. Guessed where his wife was. Got blind drunk and decided to phone her.'

'He says he didn't call. And she says it wasn't her husband.'

'Okay,' Abbeline said carefully. 'Let's rule out Tom Garrison as the caller for a moment. When I spoke to Dr Kavanagh this morning she told me she gets disturbed patients calling her at all times. Sometimes even hanging around outside.'

'The voice says "Claire". Repeats it in fact,' Briden said. A small middle-aged man had got out of the Cavalier. He glanced up nervously at the building and stood, wiping the palms of his hands down his thighs. A woman got out of the passenger seat and together they began to cross the car park Briden crossed his fingers in his pocket and turned back to Abbeline.

'I'm playing devil's advocate here,' Abbeline said, 'but Mrs Garrison picked up the phone after two or more hours of sleep.' He changed cassettes and played back the breathy voice. 'That voice could easily have been saying "Kate, Kate." Couldn't it?' He paused. 'No, you're right. It couldn't.'

'So if the voice isn't saying "Kate" . . . If the voice isn't her husband . . .'

'And is saying "Claire" . . . ?' Abbeline raised his eyebrows.

'Then I'm very pleased Mrs Garrison is spending a few days in France,' Briden said.

'Except that our mystery man is most certainly attached to Paris, as resident or part-time resident.'

Briden nodded. 'True.'

'And our only remaining family-member suspect, Adam Garrison, lives and works there.'

'You're not saying Adam Garrison made that call?' Briden said.

'No,' Abbeline said carefully. 'I don't think I am.'

Both men turned sharply at a knock at the door. A uniformed sergeant entered, clearly finding it difficult to suppress a smile.

'What is it?' Briden asked him, 'You look as though you just swallowed the cream.'

'You might say that, sir,' the sergeant said. 'A little fat man and his wife just walked up to the desk.'

'And?'

'They want to speak to Mr Abbeline. They say they know the address of the man who killed Corby Garrison.'

Abbeline and Briden had just arrived at the second-floor flat in Hammersmith Grove. For a few moments they stood watching the scene of crime specialists finishing their work. Photographs had already been taken, fingerprints dusted for, cupboards and clothing searched. One man was now lifting the floorboards.

It was a small flat – two bedrooms, living room, bathroom and kitchen. The landlords were a Polish couple who lived in Birmingham; there was no reason to believe they had ever seen their tenant, everything having been handled by a company of managing agents located round the corner on Goldhawk Road. Downstairs neighbours were still out. Upstairs neighbours had only once seen a back view of the new tenant going down the stairs.

'Has anybody spoken to the managing agents yet?' Briden asked.

One of the detective-sergeants came forward. He flipped his notebook. 'Ulrike Steiner. A German girl of about eighteen. She works behind the desk. Good English. Very efficient. Pretty well runs the company.'

'When was the place rented?' Briden asked.

'Three weeks ago, for a six-month let. Ulrike handled it.'

'What did she have to say about the tenant?'

'There's the rub, sir. She couldn't remember too much about him. Respectable, she said. Perhaps middle-aged.'

'Perhaps?'

'She's eighteen. Everybody looks middle-aged to her. I showed her pictures of Tom Garrison, just to be on the safe side. She looked them over carefully, but she was certain it wasn't him. A good witness, but rushed off her feet because she's the only one doing any work in the bloody office.'

'How did he pay?'

'Six months in advance. Cheque signed by J. S. Peters.'

'References,' Abbeline said. 'He must have given references.'

'Yes.' The sergeant consulted his notebook. 'Bank reference. Does he have the sort of balance to cover the rent? Answer, yes. But irrelevant because he's paid in advance anyway. The other reference was a Mrs Joyce Cromer, address in north London which turns out not to exist.'

'Your German youngster must have checked at the time?'

The sergeant shook his head. 'It was the office manager's responsibility. He insisted to me he'd checked and found no problems. When I told him the address didn't exist he looked a bit sheepish and said it must have slipped his mind.'

Abbeline nodded, his eyes wandering over the furniture, mostly cheap mail-order stuff with a few heavy Victorian pieces left over from some forgotten inheritance. His gaze

stopped at the television set. 'Supplied by the owner?' he asked.

'Installed by the tenant,' one of the men said. 'Same thing. Six months in advance. J. S. Peters cheque.'

'Let's see what we've got, then.' Abbeline gestured to the detective-sergeant to join them and walked with Briden into the kitchen. 'Fingerprints?'

'Plenty, sir. They're going off to the lab now. Looks as if he intended continuing to use the place.'

Abbeline nodded. 'Weapons?'

'But not the murder weapon, sir. A Colt .44. Clean, well kept. Found in the back of a clothes cupboard.'

'What about personal items? Books, CDs, magazines bought from a local shop perhaps?'

'Nothing like that, sir.'

'Clothes.'

'One very empty cupboard.'

The detective-constable who had been lifting floorboards brought a brown paper envelope to the kitchen table. 'Stowed away under a loose board, sir,' he said.

Abbeline nodded his thanks and slid the contents of the envelope onto the table. He saw a Barclays chequebook and a folded bank statement with £5,324 in the credit column. He saw a credit card in the name of J. S. Peters. He saw a heavy-duty stapler which had been adjusted to make an official stamp. He saw three British passports, one of the old blue stiff-cover variety, the other two burgundy red European Community covers. On the blue passport the name J. S. Peters occupied the top panel With a pencil he opened the two burgundy passports. The inside back covers where the passport holder's information was to be recorded and the photographs placed were blank. With the point of the pencil

he flipped open the blue passport. The photograph section was also blank. Reasonable enough, Abbeline thought. Waiting to know if Mr Peters would be wearing a beard or moustache or shaven bald head when the passport was needed. The stamp produced a workable facsimile of the Foreign Office stamp for passport photographs.

Abbeline nodded his thanks. 'Get it all sent away,' he said. He began to drift round the small flat. No clothes in the bedroom but a stock of packet foods in the kitchen cupboards. Beers in the refrigerator. A stock of Findus frozen food in the small freezer. 'A place to hide up,' Abbeline said to Briden.

Briden nodded. 'Everything points to it.'

Abbeline walked ahead into the bathroom. A detective was packaging everything in polythene bags. Abbeline rested his shoulder on the door jamb. 'Anything out of the ordinary?'

'He left a halfway decent watch Slipped down behind the shelf here. Apart from that, it's toothbrush, paste, a few toiletries . . .'

Abbeline was staring at a polythene bag containing the watch. A slim Longines with a distinctive blue and white diagonal strap.

In his years as a policeman he had trained himself not to let his jaw drop. But be was next to certain where he had seen that watch before.

20

Sitting at his office desk, Adam Garrison saw the tension in Claire's face as she listened to Jacobi's account of his meeting with Lili Sabatier.

Jacobi, framed by the long window between the bookcases, drew on his cigarette. 'The German, Prinz, is almost certainly not our man,' he said to Claire. 'I think if the man we're looking for had been German, with a strong accent when he spoke English, that would have come through from one of Corby's schoolfriends.'

'More than that,' Adam said, 'I can't believe that someone like Prinz as described by Lili would appeal to a would-be sophisticate like Corby.'

'That means that any trail's gone cold, then?' Claire said.

'No,' Jacobi said slowly. 'We still have the connection with the silk shirt. I think Prinz knew the man we're looking for. I think he sold him, or gave him, the shirt.' He glanced at Adam. 'I also think, Madame Garrison, you should accept police protection for a few days.'

Claire looked at him in surprise. 'You don't think that's necessary?'

'Until we know the precise motive for Corby's murder, I think it's wise.'

Claire shook her head. 'I'm going to my father's island

tomorrow morning. He has more security there than the Elysée Palace.'

'And tonight?' Jacobi asked.

Claire shrugged.

'Will you have dinner with me, Claire?' Adam said.

Again she shook her head. 'My father has made it clear that he requires my presence.' She looked at Jacobi. 'He's also my boss, remember.' She moved towards the door, gesturing to Adam not to come with her. 'Call me at the island,' she said to him, and slipped quickly out of the office.

The day's sporadic rain seemed finally gone. In the evening sunlight the paving stones were quickly drying. Café tables had been replaced on the pavements. At the Musée d'Orsay it was closing time. A group of teenagers, clutching catalogues, emerged from the old station building and streamed across the road, gesturing to the stopped traffic. At the Café Monopole, Steven Ross sat opposite Claire, the evening sunshine throwing the background of the bar into deep shadow. The strong smell of coffee floated along the pavement from the cafés on either side. 'The island,' Claire said, 'is linked to the land by a short rocky causeway. Twenty, thirty miles along the coast from Marseille. My father loves it because it represents wealth and warmth and everything he never had in the camps.'

'And you?'

'I love it because it's one of the most beautiful places on earth.'

'And?'

She laughed. 'You're right, there's another reason too. More difficult to pin down. A sense that, for my father, it's

somehow appropriate to have a magical island. Like Prospero perhaps.'

He was silent for a moment, watching the people in the street. 'And you're going with him? To the island.'

She hesitated. 'He asked me to.'

'Tonight?'

'I'm having dinner with him tonight at his hotel. Flying down to the island tomorrow morning.'

'It's what you want to do?'

She looked at him, uncertain how to answer. 'It's what he wanted me to do. As I seem to have to remind everybody, he's my boss, too.'

'Sure . . .'

'What about you?'

'My lady at the stud farm thought she'd done enough for us this year,' he said. 'Instead I've fixed to be in Orléans this evening.'

'Orléans?'

'I'm seeing one of the deacons at the cathedral. He's Cambodian. One of our Amnesty consultants on the Khmer Rouge. Whenever I go to see him I take a room at the Hôtel de l'Abbaye in Beaumont sur Loire; it's one of my great favourites.'

The teenagers waved and called across the traffic to friends on the other side of the street. He rolled two ten-franc coins onto the table and they stood up and began to walk.

He put his arm lightly around her shoulder. 'Are you going to say yes?' he asked, after they had walked for a few minutes.

'Say yes to what?' She turned her face towards him, then stopped. 'To hell with it,' she said. 'I'm being what I hate in other women. I'm being coy. You're asking me to go with you. To Beaumont.'

They were standing on the pavement, people moving past them. He took her hand. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm asking you to stay with me tonight.'

'Ignore my boss's orders . . .'

'Your father's orders. And come with me.'

'The Hôtel de l'Abbaye in Beaumont sur Loire.'

'Will you?'

'Will I dare, you mean?' she said lightly. 'Hell, you see through me, don't you. You see the shell, the carapace. Professional woman, firm negotiator for Soviet camp documents, nobody's pushover in life. But you know that underneath it's not like that.'

'Isn't it?'

'No, it isn't. At the age of thirty-three I'm bounced around by my father in emotional storms I don't really understand.' She laughed shortly. 'Maybe it happens to everybody – at the age of fourteen. Maybe at my age it's time to grow up.' Her head was swimming. The sounds and smells of Paris swirled around her.

'Don't think about it,' he said. 'It's not a thing to be thought about. You're free to decide, if you don't think about it. That way no one, and no train of events, decides for you.'

She shuddered violently. Walk out on Midas. Call him, tell him she would be at the island tomorrow night or even the day after tomorrow? Meet Steven Ross in Beaumont sur Loire instead?

She understood clearly why Midas wanted her at the island. He wanted it to be exclusively himself who helped her through this crisis in her life, advised her, guided her. She remembered vividly, like a collage of her past, a dozen incidents with her father, Midas praising, blaming, rewarding, condemning . . . There were no incidents in the collage when

she had defied him on any issue of importance. Not as a child. Not as a young woman. Could she, she wondered, do it now?

From Briden's office in the Barnes police building, Abbeline was speaking to the Hôtel Belvedere, Paris. 'Engaged?' he said. 'Good. Mrs Garrison is in her room, then Please put me through to her the moment she finishes her present call. I'll hold on.' He turned to Briden. 'Belt and braces, George,' he said. 'Just in case the French police don't reach her in time.'

In room 113 at the Belvedere Claire had just got through to her father at the Crillon.

'Kitten,' her father's voice purred over the line. 'What's keeping you?'

Claire drew a deep breath. 'I won't be coming with you to the island tomorrow, Midas.' It came out much more formally than she had intended. 'I have some things I want to do in Paris. I'll join you there on Monday.'

'Oh?' He was adept at silences, she knew that. That one syllable of enquiry was to force her on the defensive. God, she knew him so well, it ought to be easy.

'See you Monday, then,' she said, marvelling at her own courage.

'Claire,' his voice boomed on the line.

'Monday, Midas, I'll let you know the time later.' She put down the phone, exhilarated. Now get out of here quickly before he called back.

She thought to ring down for someone to collect her cases, decided to take them herself, took a quick look around and made for the door.

The phone rang.

She glanced back, hesitated. She had a sharply etched image of Midas standing there, generating anger to hide his disappointment that she wouldn't be going to the island. It was just one day later, she reminded herself; Monday was only a day later.

She turned her back on the ringing phone. Pulling open the door, she walked quickly out into the corridor.

In the lobby Claire asked for someone to take her bags to the red Peugeot 205 which had been hired for her. Paying her bill, she received the car keys and papers from the concierge.

'Before you leave, Madame Garrison,' he said, 'there are two men here to see you. Could I offer you the manager's office to talk to them in?'

'I don't understand you,' Claire said, frowning.

'Policemen,' the concierge said. 'In plain clothes, but policemen.'

The two men were crossing the lobby. Both were young, dressed in casual jackets and ties. The tall one carried a briefcase. 'Madame Garrison,' he said. 'Could we ask you one or two questions?'

While she glanced down at his Police Judiciaire ID, she thought of Corby. Wondered if again, she was about to intervene in her life.

'We have been offered the manager's office,' the short detective said, and led the way, expecting Claire to follow.

She hesitated then followed him into a room off the lobby. The other detective came in and closed the door. Placing the briefcase on the desk, he took out a black notebook.

'What is it you want?' Claire asked him.

'I apologise for troubling you, madame,' he said.

Claire waited.

'We have a report of a theft which perhaps you can help us with.'

'A theft?'

'From a Mr Steven Ross.'

She frowned.

'He's known to you?' the detective asked.

'Yes, yes, of course.'

'Did you see him today?'

'Less than an hour ago.'

The detective looked at his notebook. 'Can you tell us if he was wearing his watch today. Longines with a blue and white striped strap?'

She was completely baffled. 'Yes . . . yes he was.'

'Are you quite sure of that?'

She thought of them sitting together at the Quai d'Orsay. She could see the cuff of his hound's-tooth jacket lift slightly as he rolled coins onto the table. As they walked away he had looked at his watch and again she remembered the blue and white strap. 'Yes, I'm sure,' she said.

The two policemen stared at her, not hostilely.

'Quite sure, madame?'

'Quite sure,' Claire said. 'What's this all about? Has he reported his watch stolen?'

The detective shrugged. 'I know no more than you do, madame. Anyway, if you're certain he had his watch this afternoon . . .' He stood up.

'That's all you wanted to ask me?'

'For the moment.'

Claire stood in the middle of the room. A thought had struck her. Steven wasn't wearing the watch yesterday at Strand Antiques. He was wearing a polo shirt . . . no watch. But if he had reported the watch stolen in England, why were

they questioning her here in France? Why were they questioning her at all? 'Are you telling me that all this is because a watch has been stolen?' she asked incredulously. 'Or reported stolen?'

The two detectives conferred in whispers. 'Can we ask you to wait here a few minutes, madame? We have a telephone call to the office to make.'

'I'm in a hurry,' Claire said.

'Nevertheless, madame,' the tall detective said. 'We will have to ask you to be patient for a few more moments.' He gestured to his colleague and they withdrew into the lobby. Through the part-open door Claire watched them cross to the telephones.

She looked at her own watch. It was getting late. It was a good hour or more's drive to Beaumont. She had the irritating notion that the two detectives were accusing her of having stolen the watch.

She could see that one policeman was bent over the phone, the other, leaning with his back against the wall, was facing the open door of the manager's office. She knew that in France, even more than in England or America, you didn't simply refuse a request to co-operate with the police. She couldn't easily just walk past the detective watching the door while his colleague sorted out some bureaucratic muddle on the phone.

The Hôtel Belvedere receptionist was forced to lean from her chair to call the concierge from the reception desk. 'I've a call from London for Mrs Garrison. The police in London. I'm getting no answer from her room.'

The concierge came over to stand in the doorway 'That's because the police are talking to her here,' he said knowingly.

In the lobby the tall detective was still trying to get his instructions clear. The other detective, bored with watching a half-open door, turned to pick up the extra *écouteur* attached to the phone and began to listen to what the office had to say.

Claire saw her moment. Picking up her shoulder-bag, she walked through the carpeted lobby, past the two policemen bent over the phone and out into the street. Getting into the red Peugeot, she headed south across Paris towards the Orléans *autoroute*.

21

The hotel's brochure said the building was formerly the medieval gatehouse to the town. But it was a gatehouse the size of a small castle. Stone-turreted, it crouched opposite the abbey built by Mary de Medici and shared with it the commanding view across the river. Through the arch was a jumble of timbered buildings with lights shining from latticed windows. An old porter met her car in the cobbled courtyard and took her bag while she parked her hired Peugeot in the garage converted from the extensive stables. She climbed the steps and walked along the stone-walled terrace that ran in front of the hotel. Inside she could see people moving through reception.

She took a deep breath and walked through the door the porter held open for her. In her good, only slightly American-accented French, she told the receptionist that Monsieur Ross had booked the room, that he would be arriving later.

The middle-aged woman at the desk turned the pages of a ledger and nodded. She looked up. 'Do you want dinner, Madame Ross?'

Claire shook her head. 'No thank you. I'd like to go straight up to the room.'

She followed the porter up the broad oak stairway Madame Ross. An unidentifiable shiver passed through her Little more than a week ago and she had been incontestably,

incontrovertibly, Madame Garrison.

The room was large, galleried and looked down on the long lamp-lit bridge over the river Loire. It was ten o'clock. He would be here within an hour or so. She unpacked her overnight bag. Every time she raised her head in the large mirrored room she saw the bed, a massive, gilt-backed antique, squatting on cabriole legs on the low gallery behind her.

Madame Ross.

Outside around the bridge she could see a river mist rising For a moment she stood at the window, counting the arches spanning the broad, shallow river. Joan of Arc had crossed this bridge at the head of an army marching to fight the English over five hundred years ago.

She got her coat and walked quickly down through reception and out of the hotel. Standing under the great arch, she was only a few dozen yards from the bridge. She walked forward, into the yellow lamp-lit mist, hearing now the gurgle and bubble of the fast current over the rocks.

There was no traffic. Standing in the middle of the bridge she could look back at the roofs and towers of Beaumont.

What she was doing now, preparing to spend a weekend with a man still not much more than a stranger, filled her with a sense of confused excitement. She would have preferred all this to have come later. But if it was happening now she felt entitled to take it now. Some things she knew about herself. She was a highly-sexed, ambitious woman who was used to getting her own way. Even before Tom's arrest she had known that she had reached a crossroads in her life. Had probably reached the crossroads a year or two before without seeing it. And now Tom had provided the reason for her to break away. Was that how it was? She walked on

across the bridge, marvelling now that she was immersed in river mist, a warm grey wall circling the yellow lamplight under which she stood.

Leaning against the damp stone, she thought she heard a car approach along the river road and turn under the arch into the hotel. At a distance of a hundred yards or so she had been unable even to see its lights, but she was somehow certain it was him.

The man who called himself Steven Ross stood on the riverbank and strained his eyes into the mist rising through the yellow lamplight on the bridge. He had never appreciated the movement of the mist before, never seen how it rose from the river, sinuously curled over the stone balustrade, balletically swirled around the iron lamp-stands.

A distant figure, far out on the bridge, walked slowly towards him.

The sound of lapping water carried his mind back to another riverbank, to the Thames at Barnes, where he had stood for a few moments yesterday morning among the small crowd gathered to watch the police in blue coveralls, working behind the fluttering blue and white plastic tapes, sieving shovelfuls of gravel and muddy water. On the sunlit bank, above the high-tide line, big, irregular splotches of white had marked places where they had taken plaster casts of footprints He had tried to think where he had stepped.

In daylight the Barnes riverbank had looked different. Much more exposed than he had thought. He ran his tongue slowly across his upper lip, thinking: was there any possible connection between Corby and Steven Ross?

Begin with the meeting in the pub near the school It had been no problem to arrange Ten pounds to the school

caretaker had given him the name of the pub where the landlord was not too scrupulous about under-age drinking. There, in the midst of half a dozen other girls, she had caught his eye, held the glance. And when he had walked slowly out she had followed him. That was how the first date had been made.

He had picked her up from the lane outside the school. One flash of headlights in the darkness. No name given. Long silences to create a mysterious effect. She had loved it.

'I don't tell you my name,' he had said, 'because it's not important. I know what you want. You want escape. Escape from boredom. Escape from rules. You want escape from yourself.'

She had swallowed it all willingly.

'Tonight I'm going to explore you. Tonight I'm going to find out all about you. Where you live. Who you live with. The details of your life. That's what turns me on.'

'I live in Chelsea with my brother and his wife.'

'All about them, then. All about the life you lead together.'

She had laughed her perfect, even-toothed laugh. 'You know you're weird, you know that?'

'You'll like it,' he said, smiling. 'You'll like it more than you've ever liked anything before.'

But he had underrated her. When they drove to his rented apartment in Hammersmith Grove that first Sunday night he had thought she was hopelessly lost. She had protested she was. But not so. Obviously she had known the neighbourhood better than she'd admitted. More than that she'd taken the phone number from the phone which he'd forgotten to hide. Smart. But that smartness had cost her her life.

And yet he had never thought to kill her. He had thought

to abandon her. Just not turn up at the Chelsea pub they'd arranged to meet at on Sunday night for their trip to Paris By then in any case he would have been in Moscow. It had been a shock when she had phoned him late Saturday night. It gave him no choice. He had got all he wanted from her. Information about Claire . . . Claire Garrison . . . Claire Midasov was all he needed of her. A twenty-six-year update. He had got the update he needed. And the girl had got a kitchen knife in her belly when she'd phoned him to ask him to come round.

He stopped smiling. The knife was his first mistake. He should have strangled her quietly in the car. If the knife was his first mistake the recording was the second. A psychiatrist was bound to have recorded her calls, he ought to have thought of that. But for a supreme piece of luck which Corby called the Hammersmith apartment from a phone box he might be sitting in a cell in Barnes police station now

Risks were necessary but mistakes made him unhappy. Had he made others when he disposed of Corby? Let's see now. Very carefully he began to check over the sequence of events He had parked the old Ford tight to the kerb on the bank above a towpath bench he could just make out through the bushes. Killed the lights. Got out and opened the rear door. Checked that the long mortician's apron he had made out of the shower curtain from his own apartment was properly in place. Lifted her body from the back seat. Carried her down to the towpath.

Now think carefully. Run each event in your mind like a film in slow motion. The shoe fell as you lifted her over the iron rail that separates towpath from water's edge. The right shoe. Was the other shoe still on her left foot? Yes. The falling shoe tumbled down to the mud and gravel below. You see it

all in your mind's eye now. Lifting her over the rail and carrying her down to the water's edge, seeing it so sharply that you can almost feel the stones and gravel pressing hard into your bare feet.

Now wading into the water, four yards and bending, like a discus thrower, to hurl her. There. See her arms and legs flying and her pale bare buttocks as she jack-knifed ridiculously in flight. A gigantic splash of white water in the darkness. And somewhere behind you the flashing of a blue light as a police car slowed on the road above the towpath.

The man who called himself Steven Ross stood motionless in concentration But for the silk shirt that he had stripped off her as a last-minute thought, she had been fully dressed when he lifted the body out of the car. So it had to have been that the thrust of the kitchen knife had sliced the waistband of her skirt and briefs before entering her. That was the only explanation. The skirt and briefs had fallen from her body unnoticed by him somewhere between the car and the water's edge. And then the third mistake: to have dropped the black silk shirt as he scrambled up the bank, dropped it in panic. Yes, panic as the blue light of the cruising police car had flashed above his head.

And from then? He had run barefoot to his car, crouching to keep himself out of sight of the slowly moving cruiser. Had they seen something? Unlikely.

Crouched low, sliding behind the wheel, he had started the engine, driving away with the open door banging wildly

The police car had not turned back.

Within five minutes he had found himself a place off the road. Among the bushes of Barnes Common he had cleaned his apron, put on his socks and shoes, carefully wiped down the wheel and dash and handles of the stolen Ford before he

set off in the direction of Hammersmith Bridge with the first lemon streaks of dawn showing in the eastern sky.

It was not perfect, he knew that. He had dropped the silk shirt near the river bank. The silk shirt he had bought from Prinz.

From the beginning, of course, that was a mistake. He had thought it the sort of fashion-victim piece of clothing that would attract her. And it had. Attracted her so much that she had stolen it from him on that first visit. He had found it in her duffle bag the night he had killed her. And dropped it like a panicking girl on the riverbank. But the gods had been with him. It was going to take time to trace an Italian shirt, bought in France and involved in a killing in England. He felt safe on that score.

All that remained was the watch. The watch irked him slightly. He had not seen it since the day he returned from Moscow. So he had lost it some time in the last twenty-four hours. But he had done nothing in that time to connect him to the killing of Corby. He had lost his watch several days later. Probably somewhere in the flat at Hammersmith Grove. Nothing to worry about in that.

All the same he had bought another in the duty-free shop at Charles de Gaulle Airport this afternoon after he had put Claire into a taxi for the Crillon.

Standing on the bank of the Loire, watching the girl, watching Claire Midasov walking slowly towards him through the swirling river mist, he felt a vast surge of satisfaction.

Many things might have gone wrong. And nearly had But that was all behind him now. The past.

Claire Midasov, haloed by yellow lamplight, waving to him from the bridge, was his future

22

The driver of the battered VW camper maintained a steady speed along the Paris *autoroute*, never exceeding the 130-kilometre speed limit. Through such details as a speed trap that records your vehicle number a whole operation can be thrown out. That's what the Candle Man said.

But it was Lili that worried him.

Since the other night he had asked around. And the word that came back to him was that some people thought she could be a police nark. That had shocked him.

Really frightened him. Because he now realised that talk about earning the cost of a holiday in the South of France might not have been just talk. He straightened his grease-stained baseball cap, pushed a tuft of spiky red hair inside the band and grabbed at a rolled joint on the dashboard.

From the first the Candle Man had asked him was she okay. What else was he to answer? Sure, she's okay. She's a hump, that's all. The Candle Man was new around La Maule. He didn't know her reputation. Just hope this whole thing was over before he found out.

Prinz leaned forward on the wheel as the lights flickered past him from the flow of traffic going back to Paris. In his stomach somewhere there was that uneasy feeling Lili had been trying to pump him But he'd told her nothing, had he?

The sign appeared for an Antar station a thousand metres

ahead. Within moments Prinz could see the garish quilted effect of the gold metal advertising board in the headlights. Prinz eased the VW to the right slip-lane and brought it to a halt beside the *essence* pump Getting out, he filled the tank to the top and walked over to pay. He checked the time. He could take a cup of coffee and a pizza maybe.

He felt good. He was taking part in something. In the warm August night he shivered slightly. He was young. Too young to have known the events of the seventies, the groups of young people organising spontaneously against industrialists and politicians, bombing them out of their geriatric complacency. He wasn't sure how far he'd go along the road to killing someone he'd never met. Maybe, if they deserved it. Or maybe not.

But he knew, or at least he vaguely felt, that being young meant making a statement about yourself, meant standing up against the rottenness of the old world. He had wandered around Europe ever since he had left Bremen as a kid of sixteen. What did you see? The rich getting richer . . . the immigrants thieving the best jobs. He had no time for any of them. That's why he liked the Candle Man and the way he went about things.

The Candle Man had it down Fuck making statements, the Candle Man said. No statement he knew of had hurt anybody yet . . .

In Jacobi's office at the Palais de Justice, Kate fought back the tears She sat for a moment, holding her hands to her face 'I'm sorry,' she said. When she looked up at Adam, her eyes were clear. 'After all that's happened, I came over to be with her,' she said. 'If I'd been able to catch an earlier plane . . .'

Jacobi raised his hands, palms towards her. 'We can all reproach ourselves with a dozen "ifs", Dr Kavanagh It doesn't help.'

'You're certain she's with Steven Ross?'

'I'm certain she's with the man who calls himself Steven Ross.'

'And you're sure that he killed Corby?'

'There are too many things coming together now that point that way. Adam told you about the watch found in the London apartment?'

Kate nodded her thanks as Adam put a cup of coffee in front of her. 'The Longines watch with the striped strap,' she said.

'Did you ever meet Ross?'

She shook her head.

'He comes over as a pretty distinctive figure according to Superintendent Abbeline. Mainly his very blond Baltic looks.' Jacobi smoothed down hairs on his own balding head. 'A man answering Steven Ross's description bought a Longines watch with a similar strap at a Charles de Gaulle airport shop shortly after the flight that Ross and Claire were on landed.'

'It's him,' Adam said. 'We aren't a court of law We have to presume guilt for Claire's sake.'

'This van,' Kate said, 'the white camper . . .'

'Also connected in some way, I'm certain of that,' Adam said. 'Owned by the man the black silk shirt came from apart from anything else.'

'And they're searching for it now?'

'It's not as easy as it sounds,' Jacobi said. 'A nondescript vehicle can drive around for a month without being spotted Or it can be picked up the same night We're assuming Claire

left Paris. Why else would she hire a car? If they planned to stay the night at his hotel or anywhere else in Paris, she could have taken a taxi. So a destination somewhere just outside Paris, probably south The Gendarmerie have a wide screen of road blocks on the main roads out.' He paused. 'There are, of course, hundreds of lesser roads.'

In the cafeteria line, waiting for his pizza, the small French trucker greeted his friend with a handshake. For a few minutes they talked about football. The man with the southern accent supported Bordeaux.

Prinz ordered his pizza, hardly listening to the two men, not being able to understand too much of what the big man, the one who supported Bordeaux, was saying.

'You got CB in your cab?' the little man asked his companion.

'No I learn Spanish when I drive,' the other man said. 'My boss pays an extra thirty francs an hour if you drive straight through to Spain.'

'I just got it on the CB,' the small trucker said. 'The police are out all over. They've got road blocks on the southbound before exit 15.'

'What they looking for?'

The little man exploded air through pressed lips. 'Guns, drugs, illegal immigrants, I don't know. A German boy driving a white VW camper It's a twenty-minute tailback. May be worth taking exit 14 and rejoining the road after Torrance.'

Standing behind them, Prinz took his pizza, paid for it and carried it to a table in the corner. Leaving it there he took the side exit to the car park His heart was jumping like a live rabbit tucked under his sweater. He thought of

abandoning the camper and hitch-hiking back to Paris. But he had no money until the Candle Man paid him and you needed money to hide up.

Worse than the money even was the fear of letting the Candle Man down He ran across the car park. Climbing into the high seat of the van, excitement seized him. He was taking part in an action. A genuine revolutionary action. He was sure of it. It's what he'd always wanted to do. Hundreds of police were looking for him. The forces of the state. A cold shiver thrilled down his back. Take exit 14, he said to himself, exit 14 and side roads all the way.

23

She had enjoyed kissing him. Not in any heart stopping way, but in a warm, sexy, anticipatory way. She was going to sleep with this man. Corby's favourite word came to mind: she was going to dunk him. In the hotel bedroom she smiled into the mirror.

He came into the room with a glass of cognac in each hand and caught the last vestige of her smile.

'Are you nervous?' he said.

She turned away from the mirror. Was she nervous? 'I'm not sure,' she said.

He smiled at her. 'Not sure?'

Something in that smile, in those blue eyes, suggested a faint change of mood. He pursed his lips, then smiled again. 'Not regretting that you stood up to your father?'

'Now that's unfair.'

'Unfair . . .' He weighed the word 'Unfair . . .'

She felt the need to move him off this tack. 'I can see why this is one of your favourite hotels.' She gestured at the sleeping-gallery above their head.

'Favourite hotels? This is the first time I've ever been here.'

She was about to protest that he had said in Paris that he always stayed here when he was to visit his Amnesty contact in Orléans. Instead she said, 'I got it wrong. I

thought you said you'd been here before.'

His eyes narrowed. He handed her one of the glasses of cognac. 'As long as you're not feeling nervous,' he said.

Uneasily, she knew he was playing with her. Disappointingly childish, she thought. She raised her glass to him and sipped her cognac. 'I'm a lot of things I haven't sorted out yet, Steven.'

He had taken off his jacket. The blue and white striped band of the watch on his wrist reminded her. 'I meant to ask you . . .'

His eyes followed her glance to his wrist. Slowly he lifted his head.

'Did you report your watch stolen?' she asked him, pointing to his wrist.

A strange chill touched her as she looked at his face. It seemed to her to have changed out of all recognition, solidified into an expressionless cast.

'Report my watch stolen?' he said slowly. He said no more but stood looking at her, willing her to explain. 'Report my watch stolen where?'

'In Paris,' she said. 'Two policemen came to the hotel just as I was leaving. They asked me if you'd lost your watch. They seemed as uncertain what it was all about as I was.'

'And what did you tell them?'

'I told them I'd seen you less than an hour before. And that you'd been wearing your watch then. I distinctly remember at the Café Monopole on the Quai d'Orsay . . .'

He took her through the interview with the two detectives, step by step, only gradually relaxing. 'I reported it lost to the Air France desk when I landed,' he said. 'I bought another one straightaway at the airport arcade.'

She didn't want to ask more about it. The memory of his

expression was still with her. 'I can't understand why they came to ask me.'

'I gave your name for messages,' he said 'I didn't have a hotel booked at that time.' He paused. 'They weren't trying to contact me here, were they?'

'No,' she said, then felt impelled to add, 'I didn't mention we'd be here. As a matter of fact I gave them the slip before the interview had really ended.' She knew she was currying favour. She knew she was relieved when he laughed

He leaned against the side of the massive Empire wardrobe, sipping his cognac, his blue eyes on her, unmoving. 'A lost watch,' he said. 'No big deal.'

She shrugged.

He stretched out a hand to her. 'Come,' he said. Reaching forward, aware that she'd barely moved her hand towards his, he took her hand and led her up the oak steps to the sleeping-gallery. Moroccan carpets covered polished boards. The gilded bed seemed to occupy most of the gallery. 'Magnificent,' he said, looking at the bed over his brandy glass. 'Appropriately opulent for the daughter of King Midas?'

She smiled, forced a smile.

'It seems a long time since Moscow,' he said, meditatively. 'Seeing you across the room, thinking that this is just about the best-looking woman I've come across in my life . . .'

'You didn't think that.'

'I thought that. The problem was to get close.'

'I made it easy for you,' she said, relaxing a little 'I was shameless.'

'I like that,' he said. 'Shamelessness I like.' He drank his cognac in one gulp. Putting down the glass, he unbuttoned and stripped off his shirt. She saw the ripple of a slender but

powerful musculature in his chest and then his back as, turning, he flipped the shirt onto a chair. The tattooed links of a chain in faded blue encircled each upper arm, flexing with each movement of his biceps. Kicking off his espadrilles, he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans, then stripped them off as effortlessly as he had the shirt. Down his back long muscles rippled.

His body was completely white, a jailbird's tan, the girls at her school used to call it at the beginning of summer.

He turned and stood like a white-marbled David, his pubic hair so pale, his penis large and astonishingly white. She had not been prepared for this pallor.

A feeling swept over her. A feeling difficult to define. One she knew she was reluctant to define. She found it impossible to take her eyes from the whiteness of the penis. Even as it stirred it was white.

She could sense his huge enjoyment. Her hands clenched. She was fighting off something close to revulsion. He grinned and lay on the bed, flicking his penis into a more comfortable position With a quick, admiring glance down at it, he flicked at it again.

Extending a hand to her, he said: 'Come.'

She sat on the edge of the bed, the glass of cognac the only barrier between them. 'I didn't tell you . . .' she said, conversation making to the naked man next to her.

He turned on one elbow.

'I asked my father if he knew a family named Ross from Brighton Beach days,' she said.

'And he didn't.'

The eyes so pale a blue as to be almost without colour. She felt compelled to make some movement. She ran her hand along his upper arm but stopped short of the tattoo.

The faded blue on the hard white flesh was like a scar she could not touch. Her fingers rested on his arm. Her mind was racing. There was something unexpected about the texture of his skin, so smooth and cool as to be almost slippery. She barely controlled a shudder. 'No,' she said slowly. 'He said he didn't. But he said it in a way that left me feeling he did.'

He laughed. Without amusement. 'You've inherited a powerful Slav imagination,' he said.

'Intuition.'

'Maybe.' His lip curled. 'Finish your brandy.'

She took another sip.

'The brandy.' He gestured, impatiently. 'Finish it.'

The tone had changed. She looked at him. A male urgency, she tried to tell herself. What else? What did she want? To be wooed? Not that either. Not by this strange, white-fleshed man.

She reached over and put the glass on the bedside table. 'Finished,' she said, although there was some still in the glass.

'Be shameless,' he said.

She tried to laugh. 'You can't just say to a woman, be shameless.'

'Very well.' Then with what seemed to her an extraordinary suddenness, he was up, kneeling over her, unbuttoning her shirt. She had to stop herself from trying to restrain him. She was breathing heavily, aware that her breast was rising towards his hand. 'Steven,' she said, 'can we just take it easy?'

'Take it easy?' His smile pressed the two long liplines together. His hand clutched inside her shirt. She knew she flinched. She covered his hand, but he pushed her away. He reached up and slid his hand under her bra strap. Still the

compressed smile and the unwavering pale eyes. She found she was desperate for him to break the intensity of his stare.

Then his hand came down and enclosed her bare breast and as he thumbed her nipple she was engulfed by the intimacy and revulsion of the moment. Engulfed by the sense that she was making an appalling mistake. Engulfed by the sheer wrongness of allowing this man into her flesh.

But she was afraid, too, of what he would see on her face. She put her arms around his neck and drew his head towards her. The action stilled the movement of his hand inside her shirt. She was trembling now, her heart beating at an extraordinary rate. Could she push him away and get up? Could she tell him that she realised what she was doing, what they were about to do, was wrong for her?

She told herself it was pride that allowed her to do none of these things, that she had come too far to pull back. That it was not his fault if, suddenly, his white body displeased her. Her arms remained around his neck, holding him tight to her, avoiding the emptiness of those pale blue eyes.

She released him. She had only to say no. He was expecting it. His pale eyes were locked on her, unblinkingly, like a bird of prey. Just say no. Say it now! She formed the words and the predator's head cocked.

'Steven . . .' she said.

He moved. Smoothly and efficiently he pulled open her shirt and took off her bra.

He was kneeling over her. With one powerful movement he lifted her clear of the bed. Her heart, she realised, was thumping with fear. She felt her skirt loosen and he pulled and rolled her, stripping it off with her briefs.

'Steven . . .' She was struggling now.

'It's not a body to be ashamed of,' he said. He was holding her down, kneeling close now, his own body pale as pigskin.

His thick penis stirred towards her mouth. 'Relax,' he said, frighteningly banal. She turned her head from him and heard him laugh.

She was totally unprepared for the speed and brutality of the act. Thick fingers opened her. His mouth on her neck held her head to the pillow.

The penetration tore at her and left her gasping in shame and anger. She cried out as the great muscled white body thumped into her, lifting and thumping down, lifting and thumping down again and again.

She knew it was rape. They both knew. It was not pride that made her submit, she could no longer persuade herself of that. It was fear.

When he rolled off her she lay back breathless, aghast, wondering what words could possibly cover what had taken place between them.

He said nothing at all. It was minutes before she turned her face towards him. He lay with his hands behind his head, his lips pressed into that long bloodless smile

She got out of bed and started dressing

His eyes followed her. 'What are you doing, Claire?'

She pulled on her skirt and buttoned her shirt. She was flushed, sick to her stomach, still breathing heavily. Where were her shoes? 'I'm going to take a walk,' she said.

He got up onto one elbow. 'Why don't you ask me to come with you?'

She shook her head, forcing something that could pass for a smile. 'There are times . . .'

'A woman wants to be alone?' His mouth was turned down in contempt. 'This can't be your first adultery.'

She looked away, towards the steps down to the lower floor.

'Answer me!' His voice rose threateningly. 'Never wanted to before?'

She stood watching the white body coil, terrified that he was going to launch himself at her again. 'Once,' she said, unwilling to concede him particularity, regretting it immediately. 'Almost once,' she said, flustered into confusion.

'Who was he?'

She didn't answer. A picture of Adam flicked through her mind. God, if only he were here!

'Good friend of your husband?'

'It doesn't matter, Steven. Please.'

He lay back on the bed, grinning. 'So I was your first. Good.'

She glanced at him. He was stroking himself, almost purring. She nodded, not really to him. Towards the patterned carpet where her shoes lay in angled abandon. 'Yes,' she said. 'My first.' She put her shoes on. She was dressed enough to go now. She turned to descend the steps into the main part of the room.

'Wait,' he said. 'Throw me a cigarette. They're in my pocket.'

She went to his jeans, white chinos with a heavy leather belt. Lifting them, she pushed her hand into the pocket. Another intimacy. Finding the cigarettes, she passed them to him.

'And lighter,' he said.

She went back to the chair, lifted the chinos and delved again. She handed him the lighter, careful he didn't reach further and grasp her wrist. Her hand was juddering with rage and fear.

He lit a cigarette, watching her through the fantail of smoke, smiling that smile devoid of any warmth. He knew she was afraid of him.

'Be careful on the bridge,' he said, savouring her fear. 'It would be easy to fall in. The Loire has a terrible reputation It eats up young lives.'

She went down the wooden steps to the room below. In a mirror she saw the reflection of the gilded bed and the ripple of the white muscles, the swelling of the tattoo chains as he lifted himself to watch her leave. She held back an overwhelming desire to run, screaming.

24

She ran down the wide staircase to the lobby. At the desk the sleepy night porter raised himself from his chair.

'I want the number of the Crillon in Paris,' she said. 'As quickly as you can please.'

He looked at her blankly.

'The Hôtel Crillon,' she said.

'Ah.' He reached under the counter and pulled a phone book from a hidden shelf. While he leafed slowly through it muttering to himself, she kept her eyes on the head of the stairs. She expected to see him at the darkened arch of the landing. But the shadows didn't stir. A few moments later, seated in a padded telephone booth in the corner of the lobby, she was listening to the angry grunts of her father as he struggled to wake up.

'Midas, it's Claire.'

'It's three o'clock in the morning, kitten, for God's sake.'

'I have something to ask you. I want the truth.'

'Let me get a glass of water,' he said, and without waiting for a reply he put down the phone.

She waited, her eyes on the curve of the stairs. She looked across at the night porter, old and frail and already lapsing into sleep. No match for that powerfully repulsive white body. But there were other guests. She could scream Anything to avoid going back into that room with him

Waiting, she rattled her fingernails on the glass of the booth. She should just leave, of course. Run for her car. Midas could answer any questions when she was safely back in Paris. She moved to drop the receiver but her father's voice stopped her. 'It's unlikely I'll be able to sleep after this,' he said.

She ignored him. 'You remember I told you about Steven Ross, the sense I had of having seen him before.'

'Yes,' he said.

'I have to know,' she said. 'You weren't telling me the truth, were you.'

Silence. Then the gobble of an old man drinking water.

'Listen, Midas, I'm in a hotel with him at Beaumont sur Loire. I'm afraid, Midas. I don't know why, but I'm afraid.'

He was silent.

'Should I be, for God's sake? Should I be afraid?'

'Can't you leave?' her father's voice asked.

'I'm all right at the moment. I'm in the hotel lobby, watching the stairs. He's still up in the room.'

'What do you want to know?'

'You know who Steven Ross is.'

There was a moment's silence, then his voice rumbled down the line. 'From what you told me, I might have known his mother. Her name was Zoya Viklas. She was committed when her son Steven was about ten.'

'Did I ever meet him?'

'Briefly.'

'For God's sake, Midas, I'm in this hotel with him. I have to know if I'm in any danger.'

'It's possible,' he said.

'You said nothing before!' she flared.

'Your meeting could have been chance. The boy might not have put the pieces together.'

'What has he got against us?'

'Not him. His mother. There's every chance she's dead now.'

Her eyes were on the staircase.

'Tell me, Midas!'

'You've got a car there?'

'In the hotel garage, yes.'

'Keys with you?'

'In my pocket, yes.'

'Get in the car and drive straight back to Paris. To here, the Crillon.'

'Midas . . . !' Her eyes on the staircase. Was that a movement in the shadow?

'Just do it, Claire.'

'Tell me, for God's sake,' she whispered urgently into the phone.

'Get in your car and come here. Now, Claire. There's every possibility he's as crazy as his mother.'

She put down the phone, left the panelled booth and walked to the main door. The old night porter was watching her. 'I need my car,' she said. 'Is the garage open?'

'You're not leaving, madame?'

'I have to.' She could think of no passable excuse.

'I can't leave my post now, madame,' he said.

'For God's sake . . .' On the landing a movement caught her eye.

'The lock on the stable door's broken,' he said. 'If you go round to the road you can leave that way.'

She was sure she could see the white chinos as a blur in the shadows of the landing. She turned and ran across the lobby, out onto the terrace, down the stone steps and across the cobbled courtyard of the hotel. Flinging a glance over

her shoulder, she saw him outlined in the doorway.

Without slackening speed she ran through the great arch and out onto the river walk beside the bridge. The shallow, fast-flowing Loire rattled across the stones ten or fifteen feet away. Mist rolled and billowed round the bridge lights, leaving her moving through a small space enclosed by its own mystery, like an empty film set.

In her anxiety she ran past the stable door, reached the end of the low block, felt a surge of fear and turned to run quickly back. She took the handle of the big door and turned it hard. Pulling, she found it wouldn't move.

She glanced up quickly at the noise of a vehicle engine and to her relief saw an old white VW camper come through the mist towards her. Twenty feet away it stopped. It was close enough for her to see the slow arc of windshield wipers.

She turned the handle violently the other way and pulled. The old door moved. Behind her a footstep. In the fog the outline of a man she was sure was Steven Ross. Steven Viklas. She had the choice now: to go into the stable, hope to reach her car in the darkness before he got to her, or stay where she was in sight of the VW camper. He was two dozen paces away now, walking unhurriedly, droplets of mist prickling in the lamplight around him.

She span round urgently and ran towards the camper. The wipers were still arcing across the windscreen. Only when she was reaching for the passenger door did she realise that the driver wore a stocking mask pulled down over his face.

25

At just after seven o'clock Adam Garrison crossed the river into Beaumont. The abbey rose on his left and in front of him the arched entrance of the hotel stood at the far end of the bridge. A morning mist rose thickly along the river. Through it the rising sun appeared hazily as a reddened ball.

Midas had phoned an hour ago. Claire, he said, had called him in a state of alarm during the night from Beaumont. He had advised her to drive back to Paris immediately. He had waited but she had not arrived. There had been no time for questions, no time to tell Midas that the police were already searching for the man they knew as Steven Ross. Adam had called Jacobi and run down to his car, pulling on his clothes. He had reached Beaumont in less than an hour.

Turning his BMW through the stone arch, he came to a stop. He got out of the car and walked across the courtyard. One of the staff, an old man in a long green apron, was washing cars.

Adam went past him up the stone steps that flanked the main doorway. At the lobby counter a middle-aged woman with heavy make-up and hennaed hair looked up from her coffee. He leaned on the desk and she smiled more. 'What can I do for you, monsieur?'

He spoke a French that was fluent rather than impeccably

accurate. 'Do you have a Monsieur Steven Ross staying here, Madame?'

'Monsieur Ross is no longer staying with us,' she said cautiously.

'And Madame Ross?'

'The policy of the hotel *direction* is never to confirm or deny the presence of ladies, monsieur.' She wagged a podgy, manicured finger. She left the finger pointing in the air.

He stared for a moment at the long bright fingernail then transferred his eyes to hers. 'Are you the proprietor, madame?' He was opening his wallet.

'My cousin,' she said. 'And you, monsieur? Not the husband, I hope. The press perhaps.' He slid a five-hundred-franc note across the counter.

Her powdered cheeks puffed and subsided. Without a word, she palmed the money. 'You should know that the police have just left, monsieur.'

'It was me who called them. What did they find?'

'Very little. The lady left during the night.'

'And Ross?'

She gestured. 'There's no one in the room.'

'You checked them in yourself last night?'

'They arrived separately. Monsieur about an hour after madame. I remember madame was a little nervous. Very beautiful. I knew, of course, they weren't married.'

'What time did you leave the desk?'

'A little after midnight.'

'But you have a night porter.'

'We're not a grand hotel, monsieur.' She got up and walked across to the door, her high heels clicking on the ancient tilework. 'Albert,' she called, and turned back to Adam, 'Albert did the night shift last night. He makes a little

extra washing cars before he goes home.'

The night porter came up the steps, wiping his hands on his green apron.

'Albert,' she said, 'tell this gentleman what you told the police about number 24 last night.'

'There's not much to tell, monsieur. Madame Ross came down about three o'clock and asked for the number of the Crillon in Paris. When she finished her call she asked me how to get her car out of the garage. I told her at night she had to go round to the other side of the stables, monsieur.'

'Did she look upset? Disturbed?'

The old man thought for a moment. 'Frightened,' he said.

'Did you see Monsieur Ross?'

'He followed the lady out.'

'You mean they left in her car?'

'Certainly not in his,' the old man said. 'His car's the one I'm washing. The white Peugeot. He asked me to when he arrived. Paid me there and then.'

'And her car?'

'Another Peugeot. Red 205. The police already had the number from the hire company. According to the local sergeant they've had road blocks in place from early this morning.'

Adam turned to the woman behind the desk. 'Can I see the room, madame?'

'Of course.' She made a sign to Albert, then turned raising her eyebrows to Adam. 'Who is she? Someone important? Some celebrity's wife?'

'You'll see it all on tonight's *Informations*,' he said, hoping to God he was wrong.

Taking her bunch of keys, the woman led the way up to the second floor. On the door marked 24 she knocked and

listened. 'One must always be sure in my business,' she said. She waited for a moment then knocked again, harder this time, with the flat of her hand. Then she turned to Adam and handed him the keys.

He let himself in, not prepared for the wide, empty room, empty of a bed.

'One of our best galleried rooms,' the woman said with a flourish. 'You're looking for the bed? It's upstairs.' She pointed to the spiral staircase and he climbed up. He stood on the top step looking at the huge, ornate bed and the obvious turbulence of the bedclothes.

That hurt.

His eyes covered the room. If anything had been left the police had taken it with them. No sign of a struggle. Unless the police had cleared up after them.

He turned back and stood for a moment looking down at the bed. The woman was watching him from halfway up the spiral staircase. 'Are you really the press, monsieur. Or the husband?'

'Does it matter?' he said bleakly.

Adam walked out through the gate arch. Twenty yards away the old stone bridge curved across the river. He stood for a moment, looking at the garage door. On impulse he crossed the road and entered the garage. Through the big open door on the far side he could see through to where the old man was at work. Parked to the side of one of the stable doors was a red Peugeot 205 with a hire company sticker in the rear window.

Using a Kleenex he opened the driver's door. A faint waft of scent rose to him. He was totally unprepared for the way he felt. But inside the car the only sign of Claire was a scarf

he recognised on the passenger seat. So the police had not checked the garage. They had taken Albert's word that Claire and Ross had left in her car. So, how had they left?

He came out of the garage again on the river side. Cars passed with a roar and a residual clinking sound. He had heard it a few moments ago. He waited for a car to pass and his eyes followed the slight tinny sound under its tyres Crushed flat on the asphalt was an ornamental silver key-ring with keys attached. He had seen it in Claire's hand in London.

He picked up the key-ring and put it in his pocket then stood on the bank and peered down river In his life he had seen floating bodies. He knew what they looked like. But he knew too that no effort would prepare him for Claire's face, trapped in the fork of a submerged tree, blonde hair streaming.

The current was fast; it always was in the Loire But there was no bundle lapping the reeds, no streaming blonde hair He stood on the roadside. Of course, a body would have been carried several kilometres downstream since three or four o'clock this morning.

Back in his car, Adam drove across the bridge. Turning for Paris, he was on the road that rose above the river, driving at an easy pace, thinking of Claire. Claire abducted. Claire murdered.

It was a brilliant summer morning. The sun had burnt away the last of the mist now and was rising above the low line of hills ahead. Here the river was about to twist away from the road he was on. In the corner of his eye he caught some movement. A low white Citroën ambulance, blue light flashing, was running parallel along the opposite bank

By a stand of trees he saw the ambulance slowing He

could see, through the trees, a dark blue Gendarmerie Nationale van. Three or four men in uniform, hatless, standing knee-deep in the river. Manhandling something towards the bank.

Manhandling a body towards the bank.

Making a quick U-turn he drove back to the bridge, crossed it and turned along the river road. The ambulance and gendarmerie van were a hundred or more metres further on. He slowed the car, unwilling to go too close.

Fifty metres from the gendarmes he pulled off the road beside a middle-aged Frenchman wearing thigh-high fisherman's boots who stood watching the gendarmes. 'What's going on?' he asked the fisherman.

The man turned a pale face towards him. 'You reach my age and you've never seen anyone dead. Would you believe that? Through the war, everything.'

'What happened?' Adam asked again, his eyes on the group of gendarmes.

'I've told the police,' the man said irrelevantly.

'Tell me,' Adam said.

The man swallowed. 'Early morning,' he said. 'Weekends I take the opportunity.'

'To go fishing.'

The man nodded. 'This morning I was out by the bridge. In this river you have to wade right out to find a metre of water. Just before dawn I was out there, thick mist, just about make out the lights above me on the bridge.' The man took a deep breath.

'You heard something.'

'A woman's screams. Terrifying. Three, four screams. Then they stopped.'

The sickness churned in Adam's stomach. 'What did you do?' he asked, for no other reason than to delay the moment when he would have to cross the road to where the gendarmes stood.

'I started wading back. Against the current it's not fast. Then I heard other sounds. In the mist I wasn't sure how close I was to the bank.'

'Other sounds?'

'Grunts, groans maybe, I'm not sure. Then a heavy splash. Something big. Monsieur,' he said, 'I was standing in the water and the ripples made by the body were lapping at my boots. Another step or two and I would have been face to face with the murderer.'

'The body.' Adam was looking towards the ambulance.

'I heard him scramble up the bank,' the fisherman said, 'and I heard a vehicle door slammed. I waded to the reeds but I was too late to get the whole number. Paris registration, 75. An old VW camper, white.'

Adam nodded. His mind was rolling slowly, barely functioning. An old VW camper. White. Beyond everything he wanted to avoid the moment when he would have to cross the road to look.

'I reported what I'd heard to the police. They said they'd check into it but I told them, a body in the water near the hotel could turn up anywhere.'

Adam walked slowly across the road towards the riverbank. He needed the time. An old willow tree arched into the water. His mind registered the branches trailing the surface and saw it as a net to catch a drifting body. Beside the ambulance he could see the gendarmerie men, their trousers blackened by water, water in pools around their feet They were looking down at a shape, of which Adam could

see only the legs. But a man's legs. Frayed jeans. Worn trainers pointing towards the tree-tops.

He came from behind the ambulance before the gendarmes realised he was there. 'Monsieur.' One of the gendarmes turned, spreading his arms to stop him coming forward. Adam ducked round him and looked down at the body of a young man, lying on his back, reddish hair black with trickling water.

'Back in your car, monsieur.' The gendarme blocked his way. 'This is not a time for sightseeing.'

The drowned face was slack, the mouth open, a small moustache barely wider than the gaping nostrils. But there was no doubt in Adam's mind that it was Prinz.

26

'It means she's still alive, at least,' Kate said. 'At the very least it must mean she's still alive.'

Adam nodded grimly. 'It also means there's no room for doubt that he was the man who killed Corby.'

They were escorted across the lobby of the Hôtel Crillon and took the elevator to the top floor.

In silence they stood together as the floors flickered by.

The elevator came to a gentle stop. 'Poor, poor Claire,' Kate said in a voice hardly above a whisper. 'What are the police doing?'

'Road blocks,' Adam said. 'They've circulated a *fiche de renseignements*, a description of Ross and the VW camper to all gendarmerie units throughout the country. They've given it the highest priority.'

'But . . .'

He shook his head. 'The system's efficient enough but the police are going to need luck on their side. Last night's sweep stopped short of Beaumont. It means Ross now has a six hour start. And from Beaumont you can be well on your way to any part of France in six hours.'

They were met on the top floor and led by a uniformed subordinate of the concierge. Kate watched the man knock on the door of Midas's suite. 'If Steven Ross, or whoever he really is, is not a plain lunatic,' she said, 'there's only one

way it makes sense that I can see. A big ransom.'

'And Corby? Why was she killed?'

'Ross was setting things up for Claire? Corby was never as dumb as a lot of men took her to be. I don't know. Could be she blundered on something.'

'Could be,' Adam said as the man in uniform rapped on the door and stood aside respectfully.

Midas admitted them, dressed in a pale grey suit with a watch chain and spotted bow tie. They shook hands quickly, Adam surprised at the weight and size of the old man's hand.

'Is there any news?' Midas asked. 'I don't have a lot of time.'

Adam's eyes were on the six or seven pieces of leather luggage piled in the hall.

'The police were here,' Midas said. 'They say the man she's with could have been involved in Corby's death.'

'I was in Beaumont this morning,' Adam said bluntly. 'Claire's not with him willingly Not any longer.'

The old man stared stonily at him. 'Abducted? You've reason to believe that now?'

'I've reason to believe that.'

Adam watched Midas's face. He saw him nod almost absently to himself. No tightening of the facial muscles. No movement of the enormous head. No sense of surprise or shock. Very briefly he told Midas what had happened at the Hôtel de l'Abbaye that morning. 'Her car's in the hotel garage There's no sign of her or of the man she was with.' His eyes were on the old man's unchanging expression. 'There's more The body of a man was found in the river this morning outside Claire's hotel He was an associate of Ross.'

For the first time Midas seemed to register something.

'Killed by Ross? Why should he do that?'

'To clean up loose ends is the usual reason.'

Midas frowned. 'But it's unlikely Claire herself is in immediate danger,' he said slowly.

Adam felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. 'She's in danger,' he said harshly. 'There's no doubt about that. Whether or not the danger's immediate, you'll soon know.'

Midas stared at him, his features immobile. Adam watched the old man pretend he didn't know what was being said. 'You mean there'll be a ransom demand,' Midas said after a moment.

Adam nodded, still watching him. 'Either a public demand or something straight to you,' he said. 'In either case the French police won't want you to leave Paris. They must have already made that clear to you.'

Midas was silent. 'Yes,' he said at length. 'They did.'

'Yet you're leaving all the same,' Adam said with mounting anger. 'You won't stay in Paris.'

Midas shook his head. It was difficult for a man of his size and authority to look trapped, but when he spoke he avoided their eyes. 'There's nothing further I can add to what is already known. I've arranged for my plane to leave Charles de Gaulle at 9.30. Kate knows the island. If you or the French police need to speak to me, you'll know where I am.'

'You can't walk out like this,' Kate said in amazement. 'We're talking about Claire, Mr Midasov. We're talking about a man who has already murdered Corby.'

Adam held her by the arm. 'A ransom demand to you will be one of the few leads the French police will have to follow,' he said to Midas. 'They'll need you on the spot. You can't leave.'

The old man's face set. 'You know very well I could be

sitting in this hotel for the next week waiting for a call that might never come.' His voice was infinitely cold. 'If it is established without doubt that Claire has been abducted, or if there's a ransom demand, I shall then have to consider whether I should return to Paris.'

Adam heard Kate gasp. He stepped forward, wondering whether it was this sort of hard shell that made a millionaire. 'There's one question I'd like to ask you before you leave, Mr Midasov.'

'Everybody calls me Midas.'

Adam shrugged. 'Before you leave . . . why did Claire call you?'

At a knock on the door Midas turned away from him. 'That's the porters for my bags,' he said to Kate. 'Let them in, will you.'

She didn't move, staring at him, her grey eyes stonily hostile.

Midas smiled briefly. 'I've offended you, Kate.'

'Astonished me,' she said.

He shrugged. Crossing to the door, he opened it to three uniformed porters. As they began picking up the cases, he turned back to Adam. 'Why did she call me? Because I'm her father.' He picked up his hat and an ivory-handled cane which lay across the arms of an armchair.

'Why not the police, if she was frightened of this man?' Adam asked.

'God knows.'

'For Christ's sake, Mr Midasov, there was some specific reason for calling you. Something she wanted to ask.'

'Be careful of that last one,' Midas said to a porter. 'There's glass inside. A present . . .'

'She was telling you she was frightened. But there was

something else. For Christ's sake, there must have been something she was asking,' Adam repeated.

'At three in the morning?'

'To do with the man she was staying with.'

Midas shrugged.

'Something you might have known, or found out for her.'

He shook his head.

'When you saw her yesterday, did she talk to you about him?'

'She told me she had met a man in Moscow. She seemed quite interested in him. I'm going now, Mr Garrison. Feel free to telephone me. Kate has my private number.'

'For Christ's sake, he's already called you, hasn't he?' Adam's voice rose as Midas headed for the door.

Midas glanced at him over his shoulder and continued towards the door. 'Keep out of this, Garrison,' he said without turning his head. 'I intend to handle it my way.'

Adam picked up the phone. 'I'm letting the police know Ross has already been in touch with you,' he said.

Midas reached the door, his free hand on the ornate gilt handle, and turned. For a moment he looked down, lifting the toecap of his polished black shoe as if studying its brilliance. Then his head rose quickly. 'Somebody, a man, called early this morning.'

Adam put down the phone. 'Did he identify himself?'

'No, there was no name given.'

'He fixed the ransom?'

'He made a demand, yes.' Midas paused. 'I told him, truthfully, I needed time to think.'

'How much?' Adam asked quietly. 'How much was the ransom?'

Midas smiled thinly. 'I think you can guess, Garrison. I

think you guessed shortly after you came in here.' Midas tapped the toe of his shoe with his stick. The words came from his throat in a heavy rumble. 'His demand was that I realised assets, sold property. He intends to make me a pauper again. His demand was for every last cent I own.'

27

The stretched limousine bowled through the grey streets of north Paris towards the Porte St Denis, picking up speed as it turned onto the A1 heading out to Charles de Gaulle. 'At the airport,' Midas said, 'you can take the car back.'

Sitting next to him in the spacious rear of the limousine, Adam said nothing. The very rich, he had noticed, always spent other people's time like water. Was that what made them rich in the first place, he wondered, or did that special arrogance grow upon you? 'What did you want to speak to me about?' he asked.

'I want to know who will be handling this case.'

'Mr Midasov, I could have told you that on the way down in the hotel elevator.'

'Tell me now.'

'The British police. The Gendarmerie Nationale. Interpol in Lyon. There'll be back-up from the FBI.'

From the tray in front of him Midas took a cigar and cutter 'What I'm asking is who is going to be concerned with finding my daughter? As opposed to finding her abductor.'

Through the smoked glass window Adam watched the Paris suburbs slip away behind them. 'It's not too late for you to turn back,' he said. 'The French police are going to need your co-operation. They're not going to be happy about having to send one of their specialists down to your island

when you were already here in Paris when you received the ransom call.'

'They won't know about a ransom call.'

'You're fooling yourself,' Adam said. 'They'll know the same way I did. From experience. If a body isn't found immediately, a ransom call comes like night on day. Whether or not the victim is still alive.'

'You're very sure of yourself, Garrison.'

'This is a field I've been in some time.'

Midas grunted and lit his cigar. 'Do you have any leads on this man she was with?'

'Not enough.'

'You mentioned a young man, a German.'

'I also mentioned that he's dead.'

'So you've no idea how to go about finding whoever is responsible.'

'I think we know who's responsible. And I think we have one slender lead to him.'

'What is it?'

'A police informant named Lili Sabatier.'

'You won't be following it up yourself?'

'I'm a lawyer. I have contacts but I've no role officially.'

'And unofficially?'

'I'll look for Claire.' Thick clouds of cigar smoke billowed and curled around Adam's head. 'Is that a good cigar?' he said. 'It smells like burning rubber.'

Midas pressed the button and the window slid down. Without a word he tossed the cigar out of the window. 'Who do you think planned this kidnap?' he asked, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

'You don't have to ask me that.'

'Steven Ross.'

'If that's his name.' Adam watched Midas's long profile. 'Or perhaps,' he added slowly, 'we're going to find his body in the river next.'

Without turning to look at him, Midas said: 'But you don't think so.'

'Nor do you.'

Midas turned to face Adam. 'Will you take the job?'

'I didn't know you were offering one.'

'You can write your own cheque. Within reason,' he added.

'What is the job?'

'No different from what you intend anyway: to get Claire back safely.'

'You don't need to pay me to do that.'

'I need someone to represent me in this case. Someone who reports to me, not to a gendarmerie general in Paris or, worse, his political boss. I need my own man.'

Adam laughed shortly. 'If I'd been trained to step out of cars at this speed, I would.'

'All right, I've put it too crudely for your sensibilities. I want to be represented on this investigation. I'll go no further than that.'

'Why? Why do you want to be represented?'

'With my daughter at stake, my whole fortune at stake, you don't have to ask me why.'

They were passing the serried ramps, exits, over- and underpasses, the signs to hypermarkets, industrial zones and furniture warehouses, that today bid you welcome to France's premier airport. 'If you'll answer one question, I'll take the job,' Adam said. 'I don't need to write my own cheque. I don't need to explain why.'

Midas nodded to himself. 'How wrong would I be if I

speculated a man still in love with his sister-in-law?'

Adam stayed silent.

'Very well,' Midas said. 'Your question?'

'Why did Claire call you in the middle of the night?' Adam watched Midas's face. 'Don't try to tell me again it was because you're her father.'

The driver drove on past the circular terminals and up to a section of wire-mesh fencing with an unmarked gate. Getting out, he spoke to the uniformed security man. Documents were examined. The driver returned to the limousine and drove through the gate. Adam looked up to see a low hangar in gleaming aluminium. On the concrete apron two or three private jets were parked.

The driver opened the door and Midas got out, stretching in the sunlight. Adam tipped the armrest and slid across the leather seat. Joining Midas, he said: 'Whether I take the job or not, I still want to know the answer to that question.'

Midas began to pace towards one of the jets. His head was down; he made no attempt to disguise the fact that he was considering very carefully what he was about to say. 'She phoned because she was plagued by a childhood memory,' he said slowly. 'She thought perhaps she recognised the man, knew him when he was a young boy not more than a few years older than she was.'

'Did she recognise him from somewhere?'

'I don't know,' he said carefully. 'I never saw Ross. But if he's the man I think he is, he might believe himself to have a grudge against me.'

'Based on?'

Midas lifted his head magisterially. For long seconds he was silent, as if coming to a decision. Then he turned back

to Adam. 'You know I spent my early life in a Soviet labour camp?'

'Everybody knows.'

'If Ross is who I think, his mother planned to escape with me from the old Soviet Union over thirty years ago.' Warm wind whipped across the open space. As they approached the aircraft, two uniformed pilots crossed to welcome Midas, but he waved them peremptorily away.

'What was the woman's name?'

The old man pursed his lips. 'Her name? Her name was Zoya. Zoya Viklas.'

'Were you the father of her child?'

Midas gave him a cold look. He shook his head 'The child was already a year old when Zoya was sentenced for industrial sabotage, trying to organise a strike, in Murmansk. When she was committed to labour camp the infant was sent to an orphanage.'

'But at the camp you and Zoya were lovers?'

He hesitated. 'Briefly, yes.' The last word came out as a sibilant hiss. 'More than that, we were partners in a hideously dangerous undertaking.'

'You said her son, the man we know as Ross, harbours a grudge. Is that Zoya's grudge?'

Again he lifted his head away. For a moment Adam had the impression he might refuse to say anything further. Then he spoke, in a voice softer than before. 'This goes back many years,' he said. 'To the late 1950s. We were in a camp, what was in effect a death camp. Not planned extermination, you understand. But a camp in which death from exhaustion or disease was usually a matter of time. That point is important to your understanding, Mr Garrison.'

'You and Zoya planned to escape together . . .'

'Yes. But escapes don't often go according to plan. Between us, we had sufficient gold for the necessary bribes . . . I succeeded. Alone.'

'What happened to Zoya?'

The big, thin shoulders were shrugged impatiently. 'Zoya failed to escape like most people failed to escape. There were very few successes.'

'The gold you mentioned. Where did it come from?'

'The labour camp was a mining camp. A gold-mining camp. Our plan was to bribe the guards. And to pay the Swedish sailors unloading in the port of Murmansk to take us aboard one of their ships. It was a great risk to them too.'

'Did all the prisoners smuggle from the mine?'

He snorted derision. 'Every grain of gold smuggled by a prisoner from the mine was at the risk of beatings in the punishment block. Or death by a bucket of water thrown over you as you crouched in the execution yard at thirty degrees below.' He paused 'You modern people understand nothing. The mines were in frozen hills. By January and February deaths could be ten or twenty a day. Collapse of the mineshaft, burial alive, death from exhaustion Death from grief Only the bravest spirits risked the water bucket.'

'How long were you there?'

'There and other places before, fifteen years ' He waved an arm, signalling to the two pilots to go aboard. 'Zoya began saving from her first day at Brogula. I remember I was astonished at how much she'd been able to smuggle from the mine We resolved on a combined escape.' His head rose from his shoulders. 'But it was still close. There's nothing clean-cut about an escape from a place like that. In the blizzard it's touch and go Dogs are blinded as much as men.

Will the snow cover your footprints? You can hear the whistles, the dogs barking, see the lanterns swinging on the long poles. Touch and go.'

'Zoya was recaptured.'

'Yes. Before she had cleared the outer perimeter.' He looked at Adam. 'She came to believe that I had betrayed her. Used her escape as cover for my own.'

'Not true?'

The old man's lips turned down contemptuously in answer.

'What happened to her?'

'She tried again many years later. From another camp to which she'd been transferred. She was a determined woman. This time she succeeded. She recovered her son – he was about ten years old by then – and brought him to the West.'

'Is she still alive?'

'Probably not.'

'What happened to her in the West? Did she prosper?'

He fixed Adam with his grey eyes. 'She went mad.'

'Just like that.'

'No. Slowly, I believe. She was a woman . . a woman of power, of personality. You understand me?'

'I think so.'

'In the camp her will and the memory of her child sustained her. That will needed, fed on, great, implacable opposition. On a nourishing sense of injustice. In the camp she was magnificent. Life in the West offered only petty injustices. I believe she needed more – I believe it was then that she began to dwell on our attempted escape together – On my success and on the brutal consequences of her failure. I think she desperately needed someone to blame, in order to make sense of her suffering.'

'By this time you were a prosperous American citizen. Married. With a daughter.'

'Claire was five or six years old.'

'How did you meet Zoya again?'

He smiled thinly. 'Looking down the barrel of a gun, Mr Garrison.'

'She tried to kill you?'

'All those energies she had once put into escape, she now put into revenge. She forced her way into my house.' He tapped his leg with his stick. 'One of the servants tried to wrestle the gun from her. The bullet hit me in the leg. But I promise you, it was aimed at the heart.'

'Had she brought her son with her?'

He nodded. 'And Claire was at home too that afternoon. In the way children are, she was more concerned about the boy when Zoya was arrested than her father with a bullet in his leg.'

'What happened to Zoya?'

'She was found not fit to plead and committed to Blair State Hospital, the women's wing of the Bridgewater mental institution outside Boston.'

'And Steven Viklas?'

Midas shrugged.

'Back to an orphanage, an American one this time?'

'Perhaps.'

'And Claire, does she remember that afternoon?'

'It was an afternoon of melodrama. Difficult to explain to a child.'

'You explained later.'

'No. After the trial, I let the matter . . .' He made a dismissive gesture . . . 'drop.'

'But she retained some memory of Steven Viklas.'

'It would seem so.'

'The police have to know all this,' Adam said.

Midas had turned his face away. His eyes were squinting in the sunlight.

'They have to know that this is a revenge abduction.'

'I told you, he's asking for money. His interest is gain.'

'He avenges his mother by bankrupting you? On the phone he told you that was the reason for abducting Claire?'

'Not in those words.'

'In which words?'

'On the phone he told me his intention was to destroy me.'

'Are you prepared to do what he asks? If you have to?'

Midas shook his head angrily. 'The question doesn't arise Claire must be found.'

Adam looked towards two big commercial jets taxiing in the far distance, then back at Midas. 'You'll do everything in your power to get her back.'

'Of course.'

'Everything except stay in Paris. Or did Viklas tell you to go to the island? Is that the reason you're leaving?'

Midas turned on him, his chin up, imperiously refusing to answer.

Adam stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Do you have some way of talking to him there that the police can't tap? Is that it?'

The old man's chin fell. From under his grey eyebrows he stared at Adam. 'I've given Viklas a number where he can reach me on the island and which the police can't access. I had it laid from the mainland by a private company for my business discussions. If I'm going to negotiate with him I can't do it with the police listening in.'

Midas walked to the aircraft steps. For the first time Adam noticed he had a slight limp. Zoya Viklas's bullet.

'So . . . ?' Midas said, his hand on the jet's short aluminium ladder. 'Do we have a deal?'

'I don't want money,' Adam said. 'I'll look for Claire.'

'And report your findings to me?' The old man began to take the steps one by one, with difficulty.

'I'll keep you informed, yes. Only because I know you still haven't told me everything,' Adam said to his back. 'Only because I want to be there when you no longer have a choice.'

Midas turned on the narrow aluminium ladder. 'That's the best I'm going to get?'

From five feet below him Adam nodded.

'So be it,' Midas said. 'We have a deal.'

28

'Her place is at the top.' The man waved a hand towards one of the tower blocks. He spoke English with a South London accent. 'A batique artist,' he said.

'Which number?' Adam Garrison looked down at the crouched, spindly figure of the bearded, middle-aged man weaving rush mats.

'Number? I don't know which number. The whole building's given over to Art Artisanal,' the man said. 'Over sixty craftsfolk. Some people spend hours, weeks on one object. Then take it uptown to one of the big markets and the French middle class spit on it.'

'It's hard,' Adam said.

'Here your standing as a person depends on your talents. If you can't make something with your hands the faction leaders don't allow you in. Simple as that. You couldn't buy your way in here.'

'I heard different.' Adam's glance moved across the open courtyard. Yesterday's slogans defaced the grey-green concrete. He prodded the man with the toe of his shoe. 'Which number?' he repeated.

'She's not going to be at any number. Last night there was a ruckus here.' His blunt, black-nailed fingers wove and tugged the reeds. 'Thumping, screaming.'

'Coming from Lili's place?'

He nodded.

'Did anybody go take a look?'

'Here?' He sat back on his low stool and looked up at Adam. 'There's a ruckus every night.'

'So what was different about this one?'

'I heard someone go down the garbage chute.'

Adam's head came up. 'What?'

'That's what I thought I heard,' the man said defensively. 'I'm probably wrong. After a ruckus like that she probably moved on. People do.'

'The garbage chute,' Adam said. 'Tell me about the garbage chute.'

The man eased himself onto one knee. 'A big tin chute on the side of the building. Anything heavy, you can hear it all the way down. The Candle Man threw his Rottweiler down one night. You could hear the thing's head banging on the sides. Like a big tin drum it was.'

Adam took the man by the shoulder of his tee-shirt and pulled him upwards. 'You're saying you think someone threw Lili down the chute?'

The man rubbed his thin blond beard and squinted in the sunlight. 'Same banging sound as the Candle Man's dog. You know, like a loose head.'

'Did you tell the police this, this morning?'

'What for? They asked me when I'd last seen Lili. I said yesterday, what for? But they wouldn't tell me a thing. Like I'm a halfwit or something. They want my help, they treat me like a person.'

'Okay,' Adam said. 'So you're not into helping the police. But what about helping Lili? You didn't go and look for her yourself?'

The man shrugged. 'Maybe I should have reported it to the faction leaders.'

'This chute,' Adam said. 'Come and show me.' He put fifty francs into the man's hand. 'What's your name?'

'Just the Basket Man to my friends.'

'Okay, Basket Man. Show me this chute.'

They climbed concrete stairs with two numbered doors to a floor. Each door was studded with padlock hasps and scarred by evidence of levering and hammering. Some of them hung open on broken hinges; some were burnt away showing blackened corridors beyond. A large iron top-hinged panel was set in the wall between the two doors. They climbed to the top. A bull's-eye window, the glass broken, offered a view of Paris in the summer haze. Of the two fifth-floor doors, one was open. The Basket Man indicated the half-open door. 'Her place,' he said.

Adam pushed the door open with his foot and walked into the narrow hallway. The first room was furnished with a few pieces of fifties furniture, scratched and chipped but clean. In the one bedroom a small table had been overturned. It was the only sign of the Basket Man's ruckus.

In the kitchen he could smell the last traces of baking. He opened the oven. A large cherry cake sat on a black tray.

The Basket Man sniffed. 'Her man's in prison in Montpellier, you must know that.'

'I know that.'

'So she made cakes for him.'

Adam bent down and broke off a piece of the cherry cake, sniffing it. There was more ground weed than flour.

'I got to get back downstairs,' the Basket Man said. 'Leave your rush five minutes in this place, it's gone.'

'These craftspersons . . .' Adam said. 'Who else gets to taste the cake?'

'Nobody I know.'

'How about Prinz?'

'I never heard of someone named Prinz. Is he a dog?'

'Have you ever heard of anyone named Steven Ross? Or Steven Peters, or even Steven Viklas?'

'Nobody uses names here.'

'Okay, let's look at this chute.'

The Basket Man walked through to the front door. From there he called. 'You can see the chute if you look out of the kitchen window. On your left.'

Adam crossed to the window, placed his hands on the edge of the sink and lifted his weight off his toes. The square metal chute, the line of rivets caked with rust, was attached to the side of the building. As far as he could see it disappeared into a concrete housing on the ground.

He eased himself back onto his feet and followed the Basket Man back onto the landing. Standing in front of an iron panel set in the wall, he lifted it outwards by its handle. A powerful smell of garbage hit him. He grunted and looked at the rim of metal, rough and dented from use. He let the panel go with a clang that echoed down the bare stairwell 'How long after this ruckus did you hear the sounds in the garbage chute?' he asked the Basket Man.

They were walking down the stairs as the Basket Man answered. 'Couple of minutes. From where I sleep I can hear everything that goes down that chute.'

'How often is the garbage collected?'

'By the city? Never. These are condemned properties.'

'Something must be done.'

'The faction leaders sometimes round up a few people to shovel it into the canal when the stuff starts backing up the chute, spilling onto the landings.'

'Show me the door.'

The Basket Man scowled 'I'm doing this under duress, you understand?'

Adam nodded. 'You'd sooner be making baskets. So would I.'

From the outside courtyard they entered the shaft housing by a small duck-door set in huge aluminium sliding doors. Immediately the same stench of garbage engulfed them. In the half-darkness Adam could see that the mound nearly reached the ceiling. 'Start looking,' he said.

They were ploughing through the foothills of boxes, cans, plastic bags. Before them was a sloping mound of garbage Lili Sabatier lay near the rusted exit to the tin tunnel, her face battered, her body undignified in death.

Calixte Sorel had been chauffeur, major-domo and finally private secretary to Joseph Midasov ever since Midas had bought the island from the Onassis estate in the early seventies. The length of time he had served Midas, and the common sense he brought to his work, meant that the master listened when the servant spoke. 'I would think,' Calixte said carefully, 'I would think it unwise to go ahead with the party. There are ten, a dozen journalists waiting permanently on the jetty. If they get news of a big party it could seem callous, uncaring.'

Sitting surrounded by newspapers in several languages, Midas nodded. 'But I must do something, Calixte. You don't understand. Everything I value in life is being threatened by this man Viklas . . .'

'Madame Claire . . .'

'Everything, Calixte,' he said shortly. 'Trim the guest list down then. Make it a small, sober gathering for supper And bring them in by helicopter.'

'Are there any guests you particularly want me to retain, monsieur?'

Midas folded newspapers and put them aside. 'Keep the French actress. Keep my former night nurse which means keeping her boorish husband. And keep that blonde American woman who calls herself a baroness. Apart from those, cut anybody else you like.'

The Algerian's black Mediterranean eyes did not leave his employer's face. He found it difficult to believe that this was a man whose daughter had just been abducted. He had not mentioned Claire since he arrived on the island. Did he really have blood in his veins? Warm blood capable of conducting pain or anguish to a man's heart? Or nothing but the ice of the land in which he had been born and raised? Calixte Sorel found that a more likely proposition.

From the sixth-floor balcony Adam Garrison watched the clutch of police vehicles gathered at the entrance to the chute housing. The aluminium doors had been drawn back and men in blue coveralls and rubber boots were searching through the garbage. It was one of those almost certainly pointless tasks that had to be done. The police doctor, briefly examining Lili's body before she was taken away, established that there would be no weapon to find. Lili Sabatier had been living when she was hurled down the two-hundred-foot chute.

Pushing away from the balcony, Adam climbed to the next floor. At the eighth he turned off the stained stairway and stopped on the sunlit open walkway. 'What is it supposed to be?' he said.

Cross-legged in the ravaged doorway of his flat, the Basket

Man looked up, offended pride clear in his expression. 'Supposed to be?' He held up a sunray of rushes bursting from a tightly plaited centre. 'When I've finished,' he said, 'this could be a museum piece. What are you doing back here anyway? I thought you were with your pals, the boys in blue. They still here?'

'Still here.'

The Basket Man nodded and leaned back and lifted something from the hallway behind him. 'There,' he said. 'The finished object. A double-handled Florentine pitcher. Lined with clay they were containers for oil, water, wine . . Do you know a man in London told me I could sell these in Harrods for a thousand pounds each?'

'Why don't you?'

'Capitalism.'

'That stops you selling?'

'When an item like this sells in Harrods for a thousand pounds, do you have any idea how much the craftsman receives?'

Adam shook his head.

'Less than two hundred pounds. Even if I prove to them there's a thousand pounds' worth of work in these artifacts, they wouldn't offer more than two hundred. For two hundred pounds they can stuff it!'

'You must be doing well,' Adam said. 'I want to know where I find the Candle Man.'

The Basket Man stood up, shaking his head. 'Probably had nothing to do with Lili.'

'The Candle Man threw his dog down. Why'd he do that?'

'Why does the Candle Man do anything? I tell you, that's someone you don't ask. Maybe he didn't need a dog any more where he was going.'

'Where was he going?'

'Moving on is all he said. South to the sun. He's new here. Not really one of us.'

'And no Candle Man, I'm told. Buys his candles made up from a market over at Drancy.'

'The faction leaders let him be here. That's all I know.'

'Where did he live?'

The Basket Man lifted his hand in alarm. 'He wasn't around a lot. If he's gone he's not going to give you problems.'

Adam took out his wallet and drew from it a hundred-franc note.

The Basket Man shook his head.

'You'd rather do business with Harrods, huh?'

'Very funny. Now I'm going to give you advice. Don't mess with the Candle Man. He could come back.'

'You never knew him by a name?'

'I told you, people don't like names here.'

'What does he look like, the Candle Man?'

'Now listen, mister. This is all you get, right? Tall, maybe your height. Hair almost white it's so blond. And nasty eyes. He laughs a lot. But he don't mean anything by it. A real handful. Now will you be on your way?' He sat down on his work-mat and squinted up at Adam. 'He's crazy. One of those that are normal as you or me one minute and hit the roof the next. Now will you get going?'

'Where did he stay when he was here? Did the faction leaders let him have an apartment?'

'Never had a place of his own.'

'He stays with someone?'

He pursed his lips. 'Let's have that money, then.' He held out a broken-nailed hand.

Adam gave him two one-hundred-franc notes. 'He stays with someone, you said.'

The Basket Man shoved the money into his shirt. 'An old woman on the sixth. Terrible fights they have in some foreign language. It was her dog he threw down the chute.'

He turned the handle and eased the door open a few centimetres. From inside came a powerful smell of turpentine. Throwing open the door, Adam stopped it silently before the rear handle hit the passage wall. He stepped forward. Three doors off the narrow corridor, two open, the facing door closed. Another two steps and he could see into a bathroom and a small kitchen – bare cement floors but clean

He turned the handle of the facing door and released it. As it swung slowly open, Adam found himself looking into a small room dominated by a makeshift easel with a half-finished painting. Shelves were loaded with tubes and boxes of paint, bunches of brushes in elastic bands stood in glass jars and dozens of paintings were stacked against the walls. Every canvas shared the same themes of snow, barbed wire, and hunched figures, hooded like monks, under the twinkling lights of camp watchtowers. The unfinished painting showed a snow-covered camp yard, a line of sketched-in matchstick guards, using dogs and whips to drive a column of cowed prisoners through a gate in the wire.

Beyond the painting, standing absolutely motionless in the corner of the room, was a tall woman in a paint-smeared apron, her grey hair held in a fierce bun, her pale eyes staring.

'Madame Viklas,' Adam said. 'I'm looking for your son.'

Watching her, listening to her, Adam thought he could see the strength of will that had brought her out of the labour

camp. And in the way she spoke about Joseph Midasov he could see all the harsh determination that had brought her back behind bars in America. Trying to decide how much she knew about what her son had done, Adam concluded that her madness lay in that very single-mindedness that had enabled her to survive in Russia and had incarcerated her again in the West. When he told her about Lili Sabatier, she was dismissive: the woman had tried to betray Stefan to the police. Zoya implied that no blame could attach to the silencing of a betrayer.

'Do you know where your son is now, Madame Viklas?'

'You must call me Zoya,' she said. 'Years in American institutions have led me to feel that that is my only name.'

'Zoya, then.'

She walked about, cleaning brushes, replacing them in racks on the scratched and stained table. 'Even if I knew where Stefan is holding the girl,' she said, 'I would not tell you, of course. What would that be but just another betrayal?'

Adam leaned his back against the wall. Take it carefully, he told himself. This old lady is both crazy and sane at the same time. Claire's life could depend on keeping her on your side. 'Would you get a message to him?' he asked her. 'Would you do that?'

'If I knew where he was, you mean?' She smiled a sparse smile of triumph. 'You see, Mr Garrison, I have lived my life with interrogators. I know their wiles.'

He pushed himself off the wall. His instinct was to face her with the question she was avoiding. 'I'm not asking you to betray your son,' he said, 'I'm asking you to show him that you can't approve of what he's done.'

For a moment she cocked her head, listening to the bubbling of the tin samovar in the corner of the room. 'Joseph

Midasov does not deserve to go unpunished,' she said. 'But it was wrong of Stefan to take the girl.'

'Would you tell him that? In a TV broadcast?'

'I've already told him, Mr Garrison. Many times in the last weeks.'

'He told you what he planned, then?'

'Yes, of course.' Unapologetically, she held his look. 'My son deserves to know that he can trust me with his secrets. If no one else.'

'And the price of this trust is the suffering of a perfectly innocent woman? That's okay, is it?' His mind was racing, wondering whether to introduce the murder of Corby, wondering how the Russian woman would react to the revelation of another killing by her son. Or did she know already? 'Claire Garrison is being held against her will,' he said slowly. He gestured to the paintings. 'Much as you were held in Brogula.'

He saw the woman's features change. Almost flinch. She was avoiding his eyes now.

'As innocent of any real offence as you were,' he said carefully.

Zoya turned away and poured tea from the samovar into a cracked porcelain cup. 'I will do what I can for Midasov's daughter,' she said. She handed Adam the cup. 'But you must not underestimate Stefan's sufferings. The orphanage in Murmansk where he grew up was little better than the camps themselves. And in America he has had a life among the underclass, harassed by the police. The last few years he has spent in a psychiatric hospital. He is intelligent, he reads a great deal, yet life has deposited much violence in him, monsieur.' Her head lifted. She seemed to be listening to voices somewhere outside. 'But

I will do what I can for the girl,' she said.

She spoke like an aristocrat promising some small favour to a petitioner. Reality, Adam realised, had only a tangential impact on her 'It has to be something more than that,' Adam said. 'The police are going to want your full co-operation.'

'Against my own son?'

'Against your own son.'

There were voices outside on the open landing. 'The faction leaders,' Zoya said. Footsteps sounded inside the apartment and the door flew open

The two men who came into the room both carried short whitewood batons. There were no preliminaries. The leading man stepped forward, grabbing Adam by the jacket, striking out with his baton As Adam twisted free the second man came at him. It seemed to Adam to last no more than seconds. Hearing rather than feeling the thudding blows on his ribs, he tasted in his mouth salts that he knew were blood, smelt the pungent tang of the men's sweat and punched out wildly, connecting and missing until the light faded green around him.

'You put up a good fight, you did.' Adam heard the words as he lay face down on the floor. Pushing with one hand he rolled over among pots of paint and broken canvases. The Basket Man was looking down at him. 'You caught 'em with one or two good shots. Fuckin' stupid, really, they only did you over worse. They told me to see you off the premises. If they don't see you leaving they'll be back. I warned you to make yourself scarce.'

Adam lifted himself into a sitting position. 'I'm leaving,' he said. He looked over his shoulder. 'Where's the Russian woman?'

'She left,' the Basket Man said.

'Of her own accord?'

'Of course. She said to the faction leaders she wouldn't be coming back.'

There was pain in his head but only occasional sharp pains in his body. Adam guessed that worse was to come. Slowly he got to his feet. 'She said nothing more than that?'

'Except for me to tell you one thing. She said you'd know what she meant. She said you were right.' The Basket Man frowned heavily with the effort of remembering. 'That's it, she said prison was prison wherever it was. You understand that?'

'I understand.'

'And that she was definitely going to do something to help the girl.'

29

The widow Marlat made her living on the basis of one single secret bequeathed to her by her father thirty years before. It was a secret buried in a lonely part of the high woods of the Montagnes d'Aubrac in south-central France. It was a secret she had protected since his death: the location of a group of pine and stunted oak which every winter produced enough truffles for her to market to a merchant in Rodez for nearly forty thousand francs.

But the care of the secret involved more than the annual collection of Christmas truffles. Madame Marlat's father had been one of those who believed that truffles required nourishment. Covering with fresh goat dung every week throughout the autumn, he claimed, had kept his bed productive. So come the end of the August village fêtes, Madame Marlat, once a week, would climb alone into the woods with her hessian sack on her shoulder.

Every year she feared someone would stumble on her secret. Lately, townspeople were beginning to learn the signs. In the more accessible parts of the hills, wherever there were hazelnut, juniper and wild cherry trees growing together, Sunday ramblers would be out in profusion, down on their knees, passing hands over the earth looking for the vertical flight of the truffle fly. They seldom found anything and never penetrated far from the roads. More worrying were

the young people who had taken to growing their smoking weed far from the attention of the police in the dense woods on the high Aubrac. Many of them were clever – university students. They might guess what an old woman was doing alone walking in the woods in early autumn with a sack of dung on her shoulder.

She was moving forward cautiously now, casting fearful glances around her at the rocks and twisted trees. The truffle bed was still a few hundred metres along the ridge, a small hollow, well away from any path or track, but routine took over now. Stop, listen, go forward, stop, listen. Normally Madame Marlat expected to take over an hour to cover these last few hundred metres.

The glint of white through the trees brought her free hand to her throat. She bit hard on her lip. She had almost cried out in alarm. She stopped, crouching in the undergowth, ungainly but well hidden. A white van.

She could see movement through the waving screen of silver birch leaves. A man bending into the open back of the white van Students harvesting their yellow smoking weed? Why else would you drive off the track, risk the tyres on sharp rocks, risk becoming bogged down in the moss and leaf mould still wet from yesterday's storms? She moved carefully forward. The man's face was clearer now as he straightened up. Blond-haired. A foreigner. She had seen enough.

Her first thought was that she had been blinded. Opening her eyes, she saw nothing. No glimmer, no pale brushstroke of light. She had never known a place so dark. She closed her eyes and opened them again and again. Rigid with fear, with no reference point to steady her, she

was suspended in a spinning darkness.

Then slowly other senses came to her aid. She smelt dank air, dank earth; heard the drip of water.

She stretched out a hand. She was lying on a puddled floor. The relief of that simple discovery overwhelmed her. If she closed her eyes now she began to fade away to somewhere warmer, more comfortable than the present. The cold, the drip of water, the dank in her nostrils, span away from her. With an effort she forced her eyes open again. The movement brought her face closer to the collar of her coat. So familiar – a sweet, cloying reek. Chloroform

She began an inventory of her body. Her hands ached and stung. Her wrists burned with pain. Her hair, hanging across her face, was wet and gritty from the puddled floor. She sat up and her cry at the pain in her head seemed to reverberate in whatever space she was confined.

Resting her back against what felt like a timber beam in a stone wall, she let her head hang forward and retched uncontrollably.

When the retching stopped, she sat up straighter, gas, ing for breath. With the cold air in her lungs her head was suddenly clear. Thoughts and images came to her.

With the clarity came wave after wave of fear, panic as she had never known it. She heard her own voice crying out to herself. She heard her own voice screaming long, piercing screams, shouting his name, begging him to come to her, begging him not to leave her in the shapeless darkness.

Then exhaustion quieted her. Exhaustion and the word madness which had flitted through her skull even as she was screaming his name. For a moment she sat unmoving, trying to control her breathing.

Think, she told herself, remember. Everything that

happened until the pad of cotton wool was clamped over your face. Remember the river mist and the fearful shock at the masked face of the driver of the white camper. Remember Steven Ross bringing you crashing down on the damp road. Remember their hands all over your body as they lifted you, their knees thudding into your back, and the swearing, thrashing anger of Steven Ross, Viklas as you must call him now . . . Remember them dragging you into the back of the van and Viklas hurling himself at you, punching and kneeing and kicking until you were gasping and fighting for life, squealing, no longer screaming, squealing thinly with pain like a wounded animal. Like Corby.

Remember that.

And then the metal clamp that secured your neck and arms, locked tight like medieval village stocks. Remember that, too. And from nowhere the sweet smell of chloroform and the huge pad of cotton wool pressed on the face.

So she had been brought here. Perhaps a few dozen kilometres, perhaps a few hundred kilometres from Beaumont. It seemed to her that she had woken several times, her head in a rough woollen hood, the driver's balaclava perhaps, reversed to put the eyeholes at the back. And every now and then the van would stop and the chloroform pad would again be pressed against her mouth until the mists closed around her again.

Somewhere, in what chronology she could not be sure, they had changed vehicles; somewhere between her memory of the cold grip of the stocks on her neck and a transition to a soft leather back seat of a car, she thought she remembered a wood, perhaps sunlight and the song of birds . . .

Waves of shivering swept over her. Outbreaks of

trembling, cold and fear combined. The intense chill in the air, the cold air and the stone wall against her back, made her think of a crypt. But the smell was wrong. The dry, dusty odour she might have expected was lacking. Instead she was reminded of the cloying stench of farmyards.

With returning memory the anaesthetic effect of the chloroform faded. In the darkness her body was racked with pain. Many more pains than she had at first itemised Pain in her legs, her hips, one shoulder. She remembered the long, even stretches of the first part of the journey, on an *autoroute* or one of the *nationales* perhaps, and she remembered other stretches of rougher, uneven road when her legs and her body had bounced helplessly in the back of the VW and she had feared that her neck would break in the relentless grip of the metal clamp. And what else? Silence. She remembered silence. If there were two men in front, there was no talking between them. But perhaps by then there was only one.

Thoughts came at her without chronology, in bizarre, random order. She thought of Midas. Of Marlowe. Of Adam.

And Steven Viklas. A muffled sound of movement came from the room above. The thought of him close by now terrified her as she had never felt fear before. She saw his pale hair and pale eyes lit by the false incandescence of her imagination. She saw his smile fade in and out of the blackness A length of chain rattled and she moved her legs in terror. With an effort she gulped air, fighting back another rush of panic. Her ankle was manacled. She had not been aware of that before. Feeling down her leg she found the chain and followed it to a hasp and padlock attached to the wall. Why in God's name had he brought her here? Fear and bewilderment engulfed her. As suddenly as her head had

cleared, she now fell into a hopeless exhaustion, barely able to keep her eyes open.

At the gendarmerie in Aubrac St Martin, Madame Marlat made her point fiercely to the man behind the counter. 'Foreigners. Growing plants up in the hills.'

'Foreigners, you say?'

Madame Marlat nodded significantly.

'You heard them speaking?'

'One of them swearing to himself.'

'And what were they doing with these plants, madame?'

'Harvesting them,' she said. 'In armfuls.'

'In armfuls.'

'Like barley.' A little elaboration of the truth perhaps, but the weed-growers must be cleared out of the hills before the truffles came into season.

'Then what?'

'Then loading them into the back of their van. The big white *camion*.'

In the boulevard Malesherbes office, Adam stood holding the receiver, waiting for Midas to come on the line. He knew he had to use what Zoya Viklas had told him, use it to manipulate Midas to save Claire. But he didn't for a moment underestimate the old Russian's cunning or his determination to survive all this with his reputation intact.

He turned, speaking into the receiver. 'Mr Midasov . . .' He paused, listening. 'Okay, Midas if you prefer and if I remember . . You've spoken to the police?'

'I do nothing but speak to the police . . . and avoid speaking to journalists.'

'There have been developments. First we have a picture

of Viklas and his mother, found at his mother's apartment.'

Midas was silent.

'The picture was taken when Viklas was a child but the police are getting it computer-enhanced to add the extra years. Are you there, Mr Midasov?'

'I'm still here.' Midas's voice was low. 'Found in her apartment. You're saying Zoya is still alive.'

'A painter here in Paris.'

'I knew she was a painter. I bought all I could find of her work. But she never dated the paintings. The galleries couldn't trace her. I assumed she was dead.'

'She was an illegal immigrant,' Adam said. 'It made no sense to give out where she was living.'

There was a long pause. 'You've spoken to her?' Midas asked.

'A few words.'

'What did she say?'

'A few words before she disappeared.' Adam pressed his free hand against his aching ribs. 'I think you can guess what those words were.'

On the other end of the line there was a long pause. 'Perhaps,' Midas's voice rumbled. 'Where is she now?'

'I'll tell you how it happened later. At the moment I've no idea where she is. But I think she knows where Claire is. I think that's where she's going.'

Again Midas was silent at the end of the line.

'The police have told you that the white VW camper has been found and tyre marks show that Claire was probably transferred into another vehicle?'

'They've also told me that there's nothing to be deduced from where it was abandoned beyond the fact that he appeared to be heading south,' Midas said.

'There's one thing to be deduced,' Adam said. 'And that's that Claire is almost certainly still alive.'

'What makes you sure of that?' Midas asked slowly.

'Almost sure,' Adam said. 'The chloroform pad the police found in the back of the camper. It's a good sign. It means he's anxious she doesn't know where they're heading. It means his intention at this moment is that Claire lives. So what are you doing about collecting the funds together?'

On the other end of the line Midas's voice rumbled angrily. 'What I'm doing about collecting funds together is my own business, Garrison. A business I know infinitely better than you. Is that clear?'

'It would be,' Adam said, 'if I hadn't checked with New York an hour ago. I have friends on Wall Street. They can detect no movement of your stock, no apparent attempt to sell property. I'd like to know how that could be if you're selling all you've got?'

'One more question like that and we no longer have an arrangement.'

'The question's coming up. How much exactly was the ransom demand for?'

Midas drew in a deep breath. 'I told you in Paris,' he said in a more subdued tone. 'A very great deal.'

'Of money?'

'Of course. What else could we be talking about? Listen, Garrison, I want to know in detail what the police are doing. I want to know what you're doing to find Claire. Did you follow up that lead, the woman, Lili Sabatier?'

'Lili Sabatier's dead.'

'Murdered?'

'By Steven Viklas. With Corby and Prinz, that's already

three deaths, Mr Midasov. Think about that, then answer me. Do you intend to pay the ransom? The full ransom?'

On the line there was no more than the slight shuffle of an old man's breathing.

'I asked you,' Adam said, 'do you intend to pay the ransom?'

'Of course I do,' Midas said quietly. 'It's my daughter's life at stake. How can you even ask?' He seemed to gird his anger round him like a cloak. 'What sort of a man even asks that sort of question?' he rasped down the line. 'What sort of a man are you, for Christ's sake?'

'I think you're lying,' Adam said flatly. The words fell into a deep silence. 'I think I know what he's asking for, Midas. I think I know what he's asking for that you're not prepared to pay, even to save your daughter's life.'

The gasp from Midas was audible, followed by a metallic clunk as if the phone had almost fallen from his hand.

'We've got a lot to talk about, Mr Midasov.'

'Perhaps you're right,' Midas said after a moment.

'I'm flying down there tonight,' Adam said. 'Air Inter arrives Marseille at 10 p.m. Have a car meet me at the airport.'

'My father . . .' she said, through bloodied lips.

'Your father is a liar and a fraud . . .' The flat of his hand struck her full in the face.

'My father . . .'

'Your father has forced you to live his filthy lies . . .' The knuckles of his hand whipped back across her face.

'My father . . .' she mumbled. Her swollen tongue stopped the words she was willing herself to say.

'Repeat after me . . .' His boot lashed out at her chest, hurling her back across the white mud of the cellar floor.

'Repeat after me. Joseph Midasov . . .'

He looked down at the unconscious figure on the floor, the body smeared with blood and grey chalk mud. Bending over her, he tore at her shirt until strips trailed on the puddled floor. Scooping up a handful of soft chalky mud, he threw it in her face. For a moment he examined her, turning her face with the toes of his boot.

Then he nodded satisfaction.

When she awoke again there was a kerosene lamp burning in the corner The light from its soot-blackened glass was thrown waveringly onto a limestone wall a few feet from her head. She could see now where the iron hasp which held her chain was mortared into the stone. Without moving she breathed steadily, clearing her head of the last traces of the chloroform fog. She was sure he was there, behind her.

'The sleeping beauty wakes,' his voice said.

She was almost naked. She rolled over. He was standing a few feet away, the lamp to one side, a vast impenetrable darkness behind him outlining his pale head like a skull. He wore the white chinos he had worn at the hotel, stained now by the damp rock, calf-length laced boots and a sleeveless sheepskin jacket over his polo shirt.

He carried a camera.

She understood the torn clothing now. She tried to spring at him. Like an animal on a chain she leapt up and was dragged back. The camera flashed.

She reached out to claw at him, her eyes wide, her teeth bare, lank, wet hair flying.

The camera flashed.

He hooked the chain with his foot and brought her to the

ground. She glared up at him from the mud and filth of the bottom of the cellar.

And again the camera flashed.

30

At eight o'clock that evening the guests of Joseph Midasov gathered on the terrace of the Villa d'Atalan on the tiny *presqu'île* of Ipi, on the coast just west of Marseille. The setting sun, still bright and strong enough to make most guests grateful for the shade of the green candy-striped awnings, hurled the black shadows of the *pins parasol* across the jutting white rocks of the gardens. Sailing boats slipped across a lead-blue sea.

The dozen well-dressed women and their white-jacketed escorts stood in twos and threes, giving an occasional quick glance over their shoulders as they talked in subdued voices about Claire. Most told their neighbours they were shocked that Midas had insisted they come; most were irritated by the fact that he had asked them not to discuss the kidnapping. It was of course the only subject most of the guests were interested in.

There was, as yet, no sign of their host. Now that his eighty-third birthday loomed and his appetite for some things was markedly diminished, Midas preferred to allow his guests half an hour to drink themselves into a good humour before he appeared on the terrace. In any case, half an hour later it was cooler and the setting sun's glare on the white rocks hurt his eyes less.

Leaving his bedroom, Midas descended the sweeping oak

staircase. For a moment he wondered if this would be his last party but rejected the idea, angry that he had even allowed the thought to intrude. But if it was his last party (the idea came sneaking back) he would make sure he enjoyed it.

If the only way to save Claire was to make this his last party on this earth he would certainly enjoy it.

Everybody here tonight, he was well aware, would want to talk of nothing else but Claire. Speculate about where she was being held. Probe into his connection with the man whose description the police had issued this afternoon. He knew he couldn't stop them gossiping among themselves, but he had got his secretary to call each guest and make it clear that he would not be pleased to talk about his daughter. They would have no option but to accede to his request.

But that did not solve the problem. Claire, he told himself constantly, was not in acute danger. She was a pawn in this whole struggle, nothing more. He himself, Midas, Joseph Sergeivich Midasov, was the target. It was a thought that put into perspective even the discomfort and probably alarm that Claire was feeling at this moment. He had long learned to suppress an imagination of the sufferings of others. That was self-indulgence, he told himself. Even the sufferings of his daughter? It stopped him on the staircase, the thought of Claire in some concrete cell somewhere. But only for a moment. With a conscious effort he brushed that thought from his mind. Claire was in all probability being kept in perfectly decent conditions, a locked room certainly, but in essentially decent conditions. There would be no reason to do otherwise. This was a struggle between himself and Steven Viklas.

In Joseph Midasov old strengths surfaced. An ancient will to survive. Sentimentality must not be allowed to pull him

down. Claire was his daughter. He loved her. But he must not allow that love to threaten his own safety. Even where Claire was concerned he must be sure where love stops short. Short of hazarding his own life, his own vital interests.

And he had no doubt his vital interests were involved here. Far more than just a few million dollars ransom.

Why should young Viklas do her any harm? Unless he was mad, which of course, considering his parentage, he might well be . . . No, he pushed aside that idea too. It wasn't Claire that was troubling him now. It was Steven Viklas. It was the fact that Viklas now possessed the capability, the knowledge, to destroy everything Midas had built up in his life. It was as if Steven Viklas held the crystal ball of Midas's past and future and was poised to shatter it at will. Or if he was delaying, it was only until Midas was forced to agree to take the ball and hurl it to the ground himself.

In anger, Joseph Midasov understood what was happening. Whether or not that was the intention, the result was clear. The alternatives were narrowing to the point where he was being pushed by Steven Viklas towards his own suicide.

On the first landing he stopped. His shoulders straightened. His big yellow teeth bared in determination. Not yet. Before any decisions, he would have this night. This night at least. From the landing window, he looked down on the terrace. His watery gaze alighted on the brown shoulders of the American Baroness von Haganbrach sipping her third Martini. A slender young figure in a cream bare-back dress, paying with a drink problem for marrying a man old enough to be her grandfather. He had invited her mostly for decoration. She had nothing to give, nothing that she would give, that is, because her needs no longer extended beyond

the clear liquid in the Martini glass. His gaze moved on. Madeleine Dassault, beautiful, elfin, and aware of how much he could help her career . . . He stood, one hand resting flat on the wall beside the circular window. Madeleine Dassault. Perhaps.

And the others? Tinsel. Women he could buy for the price of a BMW. Like turkey-shooting. Where was the sport in that? He turned his head to look across the sunlit terrace to where a couple stood apart from the other guests. They were less flamboyantly dressed, the man not tall, balding, strongly built, the woman in a flowered dress, five hundred francs at most, from BijouBijou in Marseille – a solid, heavy-bosomed figure, dark-haired, as Mediterranean as her husband. The two a little out of place among his smart guests. Local restaurateur and chef Jacques Sanguetti and his wife, Claudine – the chef's wife and Midas's former nurse during a distant summer of convalescence. For a few moments he let his mind roam over those days when Claudine had been a trim young woman in her early twenties, crisp, virginal, or almost virginal in her white nurse's dress, her heels clicking busily as she mounted the staircase to his room. Perhaps tonight if there were any unforeseen difficulties with the Dassault girl . . .

Midas urged his dry lips into a smile. Why had he invited the husband as well? Because, he answered himself, because it amused him. It would be all there was left to divert him this evening if Madeleine Dassault should prove recalcitrant. But he would save that for later in the evening.

He continued on down the staircase, his stick tapping against the cool Provençal tiled hall, and out onto the terrace. He liked the reaction of the guests standing with their drinks, the way they turned towards him, abandoning their own

conversations. Abandoning, no doubt, their guilty speculation about Claire. When money talks, Midas repeated the old Russian proverb to himself, the guests are silent.

He stood there for a moment, unsmiling. Normally he would do it for effect. But tonight thoughts of Steven Viklas were ever-present. Would he, Joseph Midasov, he who had survived so much, triumphed over so many, allow this child of Zoya to force him to take his own life?

It was inconceivable.

'Good evening, my friends.' Midas relaxed his features and smiled from group to group. Like the others, Jacques Sanguetti and his wife had fallen silent when the old man had made his appearance. They watched him now in silence – a tall, stooped figure in a white suit, moving with the help of his cane from one group of guests to another, old for his age despite his fabled wealth. Press stories had it that it was the eighteen-hour days that had aged him, the relentless effort he had put into his rise from a penniless Russian immigrant to the creator of the Midas Foundation, the editor in chief of the massive history of the labour camp system, *To Be Preserved For Ever*, and the massively successful Wall Street financier. Or was it the appalling conditions he had suffered in the camps that had really aged him? There were a host of explanations. The tabloids claimed it was the demands of the young women he favoured. That was the accusation Midas preferred.

'You should have worn something else,' Sanguetti whispered to his wife. 'Something more striking.'

'I'm forty-five years old, Jacques,' she said. 'I can't dress like a film star or a twenty-year-old rock groupie. In any case . . .' She smiled uncertainly at her husband . 'it's no longer necessary.'

Sanguetti drained his Campari and looked out across the water. His face darkened. 'But if he asks?' he said, his head still turned away.

'It's fifteen years ago,' she said. 'I'm a married woman with two children. Monsieur Midasov understands these things.'

'But just suppose . . .'

'Please, Jacques.'

'Just suppose he asks you to call round tomorrow afternoon, for instance.'

She pulled him by the sleeve so that he faced her squarely. 'Just suppose. What would my husband, what would the father of my children, suggest I do?'

'I'm saying you ought to be prepared.'

'To go to his bed?'

Sanguetti's lips pouted truculently. 'You know what I'd think normally,' he said. 'Any other man . . .'

Claudine took a deep breath. 'We've been invited to a party,' she said. 'Both of us. That's all there is to it. He's an old man. An old friend.'

'He wasn't an old man fifteen years ago.'

'Before I met you,' she said curtly. 'Now don't play the fool, Jacques. Let's go and say *bonjour* '

'Wait.' Sanguetti held her arm. 'I'm not playing the fool.' His mouth was tense. 'This is something I've thought about. Midas invited us here today for a purpose. He's never invited us as guests before. Never had any contact with you.'

Claudine shrugged. She had never told her husband of the small allowance she had had from Midas every year since she had ceased to be his mistress.

'So why now?' Sanguetti said. 'Because a crisis like this kidnapping brings out different feelings in people. Because now he's thinking over his life, those he had a conscience

for, those he owes something to. Something more than just a word of thanks for the services they provided.'

'How can you pretend to know this?'

'I know. I promise you. A terrible thing has happened to him. His daughter has been kidnapped. But still he insists on this party. Why? Because his conscience is at work. He's asking himself who has he used in this life, cheated even? Who does he owe the good times to? I don't mean the great successes in business. I mean the simple good times.' He kept a tight grip on her bare arm. 'He'll be thinking about that young French nurse that came to give him injections and stayed to give him a lot more.'

'You're disgusting!'

'Realistic, Claudine. You've never tried to get in touch with him since Never troubled him for money. Now he's thinking nice things about you. And he's also thinking of his will – thinking what's going to happen to all this Midas money.'

She burst out laughing. 'You think I'm going to inherit a fortune?'

He pulled her back. 'Not a fortune, no. But something, maybe. Enough to get us out of debt. A few hundred thousand francs. It's not impossible, Claudine.'

'All right, it's not impossible. So?'

'So if he asks you for tomorrow afternoon?'

'I'll go. Why not?'

'And if he . . . ?'

'I hate you when you talk like this. You have a glint in your eye . . .'

'Realism, Claudine. Realism.'

She shook her head. 'The glint of gold, Jacques. Midas gold.'

31

Viewed from the terrace, the setting sun was one of the marvels of the Villa d'Atalan. Now, when the langouste was cleared and as the saddle of lamb was served at the long terrace table, guests turned in their seats to watch the half-globe disappearing into a great pool of blood-red water.

'Spectacular,' Midas said, seated between the American baroness and Madeleine Dassault, 'spectacular but lacking in variety. At this time of the year it's the same performance every night.' He concentrated on the French girl. 'When I heard you could come I had a copy of your film sent down from Paris. I watched it this afternoon. You were superb.'

'It was not the leading role.'

'Not yet. But that will come.'

She raised her eyebrows to him.

That was good. Even a touch provocative. Inviting him to go on. 'When I saw the film,' he said, 'I thought immediately of my friend, Bartel. He begins casting next month . . .'

'I saw Monsieur Bartel last week,' the girl shrugged smilingly. 'His suggestion was that we should talk again in a year's time.'

'I'll have a word with him,' Midas said. 'I put up seed money for this one. I think you'd be right for it.'

'I believe Monsieur Bartel,' the girl said firmly. 'I need a little more experience.'

He smiled his big-toothed smile. 'But how else do you get experience of acting, if not by acting?'

She gestured lightly with one hand. 'Perhaps just by growing older.'

Was she laughing at him? At his age? His smile faded.

'It's a beautiful villa,' the girl said. 'It was very kind of you to invite me. I'm only sorry I can't stay.'

He frowned, bringing together his once-white eyebrows, yellowed now.

'I'm filming Tuesday morning in Paris,' she said. 'A small thing. An art film the Americans call it.'

'But you'll stay tonight.'

'Sadly no, Monsieur Midasov. I must take the late plane from Marseille. Tomorrow I must work on my part.'

'Is that really necessary? I could have a plane fly you back after lunch tomorrow.'

'It's necessary, monsieur. I regret.'

'Necessary.'

She smiled.

He nodded curtly and turned to the American girl beside him. She was looking blearily into the eyes of the young man seated next to her. Midas dropped his napkin on the table and stood up. 'Saddle of lamb's a young man's meat on a hot night like this,' he said to the length of the table. 'Claudine, come and take a tour of the garden with me and improve my appetite.'

She rose dutifully, aware of everybody's eyes on her. She guessed that, at one time or other, Midasov's tours of the garden had been well enough known to most of his women guests.

'You'll permit me, monsieur.' Midas stopped, looking down at her husband.

Sanguetti hesitated. 'Of course,' he said. 'Of course, Monsieur Midasov.'

Claudine was on her feet. She had said nothing. Her husband looked up at her and smiled but she turned her head sharply away.

They set out along the perimeter fence into the sweet-smelling night. She took his arm because she always had, and for a few minutes they walked in silence.

'Well, how are you little Claudine, after all these years? Happy, I hope. Happy with that cook of yours.'

'He's a chef, monsieur . . . And a good man,' she said. 'We have children.'

Midas nodded. 'What does he earn, your man? Enough?'

'Not a lot,' she said cautiously. 'But perhaps just enough. And there's the money you send me, monsieur.'

'Ah, yes. A pittance now after the last burst of inflation.'

He stopped and disengaged himself from her arm, took out a cigar, trimmed and lit it. They were enclosed by a stand of umbrella pines. The voices from the terrace seemed sharp but distant. 'I have made some arrangements for you in my will,' he said, drawing on the cigar.

'Monsieur . . .'

He smiled, enjoying the way she put everything into the one word – surprise, gratitude. He nodded a private satisfaction. His one-time nurse was a better part player than the actress at the dinner table. And he had had good times with her. Looking at her now he could remember the heaviness of her breasts on his hands, the smooth, curved belly. 'Does your husband know about our time together.

Claudine?' he asked her as they walked on along the gravel path.

She hesitated. 'I told him,' she said. 'A little.'

'And what did he think of you coming here today?'

'He was invited too,' she said, by way of a full explanation of his reaction.

Midas nodded two or three times. 'He's not a jealous man, then, your chef?'

She saw that they had turned off the perimeter path. It was years since she had been here but she remembered the house well. Fifty yards from where they walked, a back door to the house led up a single flight of stairs, to the balcony of his bedroom. 'No,' she said, her heart sinking, 'he's not a jealous man. Not the way some men are,' she added.

'Then he won't take it amiss if I ask you to help me up to my room.'

'But your guests . . .' she said.

'They can amuse themselves without me.' There was a touch of bitterness in his voice. 'In any case, tonight I need more than the after-dinner chatter of a dozen sycophants.'

'It's a bad night for you, monsieur,' she said. 'My thoughts are with Mademoiselle Claire.'

He nodded. He was right to have chosen her. She was the only one who wouldn't be gloating over his troubles. 'Help me upstairs,' he said. 'And pour a glass of brandy for us. It'll be just like old times.'

She had opened the door to the staircase up to his bedroom when she saw his secretary round the side of the house. Calixte Sorel, almost as old as his master, an ungainly old man hurrying forward. 'I'm sorry to interrupt you, Midas,' he said with a brief nod to Claudine, 'but Monsieur Adam

Garrison has arrived from Paris. He's waiting for you in the library. And this was delivered by motorcycle a few moments ago.'

Midas scowled uncertainly, taking the thick brown envelope from Calixte. 'All right,' he said after a moment. 'Tell Garrison I'm coming.' He turned to Claudine. 'You go ahead, my dear. Pour those brandies for us.'

In the library Adam Garrison welcomed the cooling of the evening. He had taken off the cream linen jacket of his suit but he was still hot. Waiting for Midas, he ate the sandwich Calixte had brought him and drank a glass of red wine. Through glazed doors he could see out into the garden, the long terrace table at which the guests sat, illuminated by a semi-circle of bowl lights. He could hear nothing. But he could see the laughter on the faces of the guests and the insouciance of their gestures. When he thought of Claire his anger boiled up.

The french doors opened suddenly. The old secretary stepped back into the darkness and Midas came past him into the room. The door closed and they were alone. They did not greet each other.

Midas walked across the room and stopped a few yards short of Adam. In his hand he held the brown envelope.

Adam watched him place the envelope on the circular library table, take a cigar from the humidor and begin preparing it.

'You've heard from him?' Adam asked.

Midas tried the cigar in his mouth, removed it, examined the end and trimmed an errant leaf. All movements to disguise his agitation.

'I asked you, have you heard from him again?'

Midas inclined his head. He picked up the square brown

envelope. 'This was delivered by motorcycle messenger a few moments ago.'

Adam took the envelope and slid out the Polaroid, totally unaware of the impact it was going to have.

Midas watched him as he looked down at the gaunt, dark-eyed picture of Claire, her blonde hair streaked across her dirty face. Claire crouched and chained half naked in a corner.

'Jesus Christ,' Adam said to himself, oblivious of Midas next to him. 'Claire . . .' He stood for a moment without speaking. There were marks across one cheek that could equally have been dirt or bruising. Her body was streaked with mud. Forcing himself, he turned to Midas. 'Did the motorbike come from a delivery company?'

'Calixte immediately called them. A small firm in Marseille.'

'Do they remember who delivered it to them?'

'Viklas. The description fits too well for it to have been anyone else.'

Adam forced himself to put the images of Claire out of his mind. 'So she's being held in the region. He's not trying to disguise that. Was there a message with the picture?'

Midas was silent.

'I said, was there a message, for Christ's sake!'

'There was no message with the photograph,' Midas said stiffly.

'But by phone . . . by the line unknown to the police?'

'He expects payment by noon tomorrow.'

'And if not?'

Midas pursed his lips. An attempt at disbelief at whatever threat was offered.

For Adam the Polaroid image came rushing back. 'He's got your daughter. Believe him, for God's sake!'

'The point is we know now that she's not far away. Get her back, Garrison.'

'Payment by noon tomorrow.'

'Yes.'

'But not in cash or bonds.'

'A trifling amount. I've already raised it. It wasn't a problem.'

'But the rest is. The rest sets you an impossible problem.'

The old man's eyes became slits. The muscles around his mouth had tightened. 'You obviously spoke to Zoya for longer than you admitted, Garrison.'

'Some sort of public statement. Is that what he's asking for? The story of your escape from Brogula? The whole story?'

Midas struck a match and held it to his cigar. He let the smoke roll slackly from his mouth. 'I see. So you know. Zoya told you, of course. Why should she not?' His hand massaged his throat. 'Then you know that a public statement would ruin me. Utterly ruin me.'

'It would ruin you. And save Claire.'

'So simple. But I've committed no crime that is being pursued in courts of law.' He inhaled and expelled cigar smoke, this time vigorously, across the room. He enunciated fiercely, his huge teeth clashing. 'Like millions of others, I obeyed the law as it stood at the time.' His voice rose. 'I am not a guilty man, Garrison.'

Adam felt the anger surge. 'You've been living a grotesque lie, Midasov. You've founded an organisation to support and protect that lie. You've involved thousands in it. Most of all you've involved your own daughter. Because you had to conceal the fact that you were never a *zek*, never a prisoner of the Soviet system. You had to conceal the fact

that at Brogula you were a camp guard. More than that even. You ran the camp. You were Major Joseph Midasov.'

'Yes, in Brogula I was Major Joseph Midasov,' Midas said, his chin rising. 'In Brogula I was the camp commandant.'

Upstairs Claudine moved around the bedroom, noting the changes, noting even more all those things that had stayed the same. The oil paintings by names she had only seen in museums. The massive custom-built bed that dominated even this huge room. For her it always had.

She turned away. It had not really been an affair, as Midas had called it. That elevated her role far beyond the one she had really played. She had been his whore, available to fill his bed when he wanted her. In the first week or two, it's true, there had been dinner once or twice in a fine restaurant in Marseille. But that had soon ended. Afterwards it had been a quick glass of brandy, then whatever brand of sex Midas had felt like that night.

It had all been discreetly enough accomplished with no offence to her dignity among the rest of the villa staff. Calixte knew, of course, but few others. As night nurse during a convalescence after a car accident, she had every reason to sleep in the room adjoining his. The demure young *infirmière* in the white uniform had entered Midas's room with his night tray and firmly shut the door. The servants weren't to know that the master was panting over her within ten minutes of the door closing.

Even all those years ago he still had some power of attraction, but she shuddered now as she imagined his long, angular body fifteen years on . . .

* * *

'He's killed twice before,' Adam said. 'He's a psychopath. There are two dozen media people waiting out there on the jetty. Journalists. Get them in here now and make a statement.'

Midasov sat slumped in a leather chair. 'I don't like you, Garrison, but I don't have to like a man to see that he can do a job. Find Claire. By noon tomorrow. Find her in time.' He paused. 'You stand to be a very rich man. More than that,' he said, his lips turning down. 'You can have Claire.'

'You can't stop, for Christ's sake!' Adam's anger boiled over. 'You've disposed of people as you chose for too long. Just make that statement.'

'Confess that I, the creator of the Midas Foundation, was myself a camp guard? More than a guard, the commandant of the camp at Brogula? I shall be torn to pieces, represented as being like Kramer of Belsen or Hoess of Auschwitz.'

'Thousands died there, while you were commandant.'

Midas got to his feet. 'Thousands died in every camp at that time. I was fighting for my own life. I had production norms that I had to fill. Each quarter they were raised with no increase in the labour force. Each quarter we fell behind, a court of enquiry was convened. I was walking a knife-edge. At any time I could have been stripped of my rank. Reduced to a prisoner myself.'

'I don't want to hear any of your whining apologetics. You use people. You always have. You used Zoya because, as a prisoner, she had access to gold. You never intended taking her with you.'

'For a prisoner, escape from Brogula was an illusion,' he said brutally. 'As commandant, I had made sure there was no way in which a *zek* could escape from my camp.'

'You used her and left her to die.'

'At a camp like Brogula most prisoners died within a year or two. She survived. She even finally escaped.'

'So your conscience is clear.'

'Don't waste time preaching, Garrison. Get out there and find my daughter.'

'It's too late, don't you understand that? I'm getting Calixte to call the press in. Your daughter is chained like an animal in that cellar and you talk about noon tomorrow. Make that statement now or I'll make it for you.' He was holding Midas by the shoulders. 'You understand me? Make the statement Viklas is asking for, for God's sake.'

Joseph Midasov stepped away from him and stood, one hand trailing on the library table, his face grey, his eyes part hooded. When he spoke his voice was a low rumble. 'You might as well know,' he said slowly, 'that even for Claire I would not do that.'

32

He made no attempt to pull the curtains. In the full light of the double chandeliers, Midas sat on the bed, breathing heavily, and gestured wordlessly for her to pour him brandy.

'You too, my dear,' he said when she had warmed the half-full glass and handed it to him.

She turned and poured herself a thin measure, holding the balloon glass in both hands and swirling the brandy with an awkward movement.

He ran the spirit over his tongue. He was not looking at her. He was staring at some point on the wainscotting, staring, she supposed, at some point in time, far back in his long life. She had learnt not to interrupt his reveries.

'I'm trapped, Claudine,' he said savagely. 'Tonight I'm trapped. Everything I've built up throughout my life in America is about to be crushed in mud and shit. The only coin I have to pay with is my reputation, my Foundation, everything I value. That's what he wants from me, this man who holds my daughter.'

His tone made her nervous. 'The police will find her,' she said. 'On television tonight they said the Minister himself has said she must be found.'

He shrugged, not really hearing her. 'Already I've postponed publication of the first volume of my book.'

'There's a picture of you in the Dépêche,' she said. 'And an article about the book.'

He nodded. 'My plan was that my book would stand beside Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. It would provide the muscle, the sinew of a historic denunciation of the camp system. Solzhenitsyn and I would stand together. Of course I never expected to finish it myself. There's more than enough work to fill the lifetimes of a dozen scholars. But the Midas Foundation was there to finance them. It's all in my will.' He drank his brandy. 'When the book was finished, Claudine, I planned for it to have a hundred volumes. More perhaps. Every single Soviet labour camp will be detailed. Every death book of every camp. Every production target. Every known name of every *zek* that ever passed through the wire during those days, the Days of the Soviets, as we call them, the *Sovietschina*.' He looked and saw the blank expression on her face. His mind seemed to drift. Then his head came up. He held out his glass. 'Give me some more brandy.'

She took the glass and half filled it with brandy. Without speaking she handed it back to him.

He warmed the glass in his huge palm. 'Now all the suffering of those hundreds of thousands, prisoners and staff, will be forgotten in the jeering and the hoots of laughter this man wants me to bring upon myself.' His voice rose. 'Does anybody have a right to laugh at me?' he thundered. 'For fifteen years my home was a camp in a tiny hollow scooped out of the freezing ground. The view was a wire fence and four watchtowers and snowfields disappearing into eternal darkness . . . I was as much a prisoner as the prisoners themselves.'

She stood awkwardly, not understanding. As much a prisoner as the prisoners themselves . . . what did he mean?

'We learned not to feel pain, or tiredness. Not to feel compassion.' His shoulders shook. 'We spent our youth there, Claudine. Our precious youth. Life was a bottle of vodka and the skinny body of some crop-haired woman.' He drank some more brandy. 'Does anybody have a right to laugh, Claudine? Surely not at me.'

She watched him, tasting her brandy with her tongue. The way he was sitting on the side of the bed, slumped forward slightly over his glass, raised the first faint hope that he might not be wanting anything from her tonight. Then he raised his head and looked at her, that same half-smile on his lips, that touch of cruelty in the set of his eyes. 'Are you faithful to your chef, Claudine?'

'Of course.'

'Since you were married?'

She nodded painfully. 'Since we were married.'

'Never a thought . . . ?'

'Every woman has thoughts.' She put her brandy down on the side table.

'Seventy-five thousand dollars,' he said suddenly 'That'll help you along, won't it?'

'Seventy-five thousand dollars!' It was more than she had hoped for. More even than Jacques had hoped for. 'It's a great deal,' she said.

'I took a little girl fifteen years ago and I risked corrupting her for my pleasure. Luckily, as it turned out, you were stronger than that. You took my money, occupied my bed, and when I moved on you went back to being a nurse, then a wife and mother. A weaker will would have behaved differently. Would have looked for another ageing *bel ami*. And, after the second or third, would have registered with one of those little Riviera companies that specialises in

providing services to rich men who rent villas and boats and women on this gilded coastline.'

'I could never have been like that,' she said.

'No.' He stood up with a grey, hard smile. 'You're hoping,' he said, 'that I'm too old, or too mellowed, to want my money's worth.'

'Monsieur . . .' This time she managed to convey both a plea and, if finally necessary, compliance in the single word.

'Not of course as it used to be,' he said. 'But my money's worth all the same.'

She desperately wanted to walk out of the room.

'People say I'm ruthless in business,' he said. 'But the success I've had has been more instinct, flair. Men can't accept that, but it's true, Claudine.'

She waited, not moving.

'No,' he said, 'it's only in the matter of women that I've really been ruthless.'

'You will say nothing to my husband?'

He grunted. 'He knows well enough where you are.'

'But not what I'm doing. Not for certain. In a month or two he'll be able to persuade himself that I am to inherit seventy-five thousand dollars for nothing more than old times' sake. Men are like that.'

Midas made a quick, impatient gesture with his hand. 'Take your clothes off,' he said. 'No need to worry about me saying anything to your husband.'

She paused for a fraction of a second and began to unbutton her flowered dress.

On the terrace dinner was finished. Coffee and cognac had been served to the guests and they now sat, talking desultorily, glancing frequently towards the house for the

reappearance of Midas, which would allow them to thank him and take their leave.

Jacques Sanguetti sat between an Englishwoman who seemed barely to understand him and an elderly Parisienne who seemed to despise either his profession or his Provençal accent. He was sure he had been right about the reason for Midas inviting them tonight. Just how precisely right made his stomach turn slightly when he thought of it. He couldn't of course complain. He had encouraged her, that was clear enough. Now he could only hope, pray even, that the result would be a healthy few thousand dollars.

Madeleine Dassault was anxious to leave. 'There's a half-past midnight Air Inter from Marseille,' she said to the American baroness across the gap between them left by Midas's absence. 'I really should go.'

'Don't,' the American girl said, sipping her cognac. 'If you're interested in his backing for a movie, don't leave yet. He's an unforgiving old bastard.'

'If you don't like him, why do you come to his dinner parties?'

The American girl shrugged. 'What else is there to do on this godforsaken strip of coast but go to parties?' She stopped and lifted her head, listening. 'What the hell's that?'

Other guests had heard it too, the sound of men's voices raised in English, French and Italian, a gabble of rancorous protests, coming from the direction of the gatehouse.

In a moment or two a group of men appeared on the driveway, cameras and leather bags hanging from their shoulders, the noise level rising as they barged their way past the two shepherding policemen and began to photograph the guests.

Calixte Sorel had appeared from the house. His heart was

fluttering. Monsieur Garrison had insisted on calling in the press. And he could not interrupt Midas, up in his room with his nurse. 'Gentlemen, Mr Midasov will speak to you in the library.' His feeble voice commanded a few moments' attention from the reporters. He repeated the message as Monsieur Garrison had told him to: 'Gentlemen, Mr Midasov has an important announcement to make. Please follow me to the library.'

A few more cameras flashed, a few more guests' names were recorded in notebooks, requests made for legs to be crossed, skirts hitched, and the dinner table was left in shocked silence.

'It's as if the Visigoths have just ridden through,' Madeleine Dassault said, looking at overturned chairs on the terrace.

The other guests were more interested in Midasov's important announcement. Had Claire been released? Or perhaps found dead? As speculation began to mount at the table, Sanguetti got up. Claudine was coming along the perimeter path. She was walking slowly, her head down.

'Claudine!' He called to her and her head rose.

Moving quickly out of the semi-circle of lights, he confronted her. 'Are you all right,' he said.

'Yes,' she said shortly.

'So I was right.'

Her face seemed very white in the light coming from the table.

'I was right about what he wanted.'

She shrugged. 'Up to a point. He wanted to talk about his past. About his life in Russia.'

There was a listlessness about her manner that he didn't like. He took her shoulders. 'And after that After

the talking about Russia. What happened?'

'Nothing.'

'Tell me.' He shook her shoulders.

She pulled away from him. 'If you're trying to play the jealous husband, it's lucky nothing did happen.'

'You said I was right.'

'About the money, yes.'

'He talked about it?'

'Seventy-five thousand dollars.'

Sanguetti rocked backwards. 'Seventy-five thousand. You know what that means?'

'I know what it means. It means we don't lose the restaurant after all,' she said bitterly.

'And he wanted nothing from you? You swear?'

'I swear.'

Sanguetti shook his head in dazed delight. 'Seventy-five thousand dollars. Is that what he wanted you up there to say?'

Tears coursed down her cheeks. 'No,' she said. 'He wanted me up there to say goodbye.'

Adam, standing at the open inner door of the library had heard something. Muffled and dull, the significance rather than the sound itself had been drowned by the push of reporters and photographers through the french doors.

It was only when the shouting had died down and he turned to see Calixte Sorel, white-faced, his mouth gaping open, that he put a meaning to the sound A gunshot.

'Come quickly, monsieur,' Calixte gasped from halfway down the stairs. 'Joseph Midasov is dead.'

33

The body had been thrown back onto the bed by the impact of the bullet in the chest. The head hung slightly over the side of the expensive bed cover, the mouth open showing the gapped upper-back teeth. The eyes were narrowed to slits, neither fully open nor closed. There was little blood visible.

'My wife was the last one to see him alive.' Jacques Sanguetti looked down at the body. 'She said all he wanted was to talk about his past life.'

Adam nodded slowly.

'They're not human beings, these scandal-sheet journalists,' Sanguetti said, sitting on the side of the bed.

Both men were breathing hard. For ten minutes the room had been a scrum of photographers and journalists, shouting, punching, only slowly fought back through the door by Adam, Sanguetti and the two young gendarmes who had originally accompanied them to the house.

Adam was looking at the gun on the side table, trying to remember where it had orginally been when he had run into the room.

'You can't imagine anybody that rich wanting to kill themselves, can you?' Sanguetti said. 'Why couldn't he have just paid off the man who's holding his daughter? Why commit suicide?'

Adam shook his head. 'He had as much reason as anybody to kill himself. More.'

'You've cause to know that, working for him on the abduction of his daughter.'

Adam nodded. 'Yes, I guess I've cause to know that.'

'That's what you'll tell the police?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' Sanguetti said. 'My wife was once his nurse. Halfway through dinner he came over and told her he was too tired to continue. Asked her to bring him up here. He must have killed himself just minutes after she left.'

Adam nodded again. He could feel the anxiety in Sanguetti to keep his wife in the clear. He looked again at the huge bloodstain on Midasov's chest.

Suicides mostly shot themselves in the head. They'd learnt it from television. Perhaps Midasov didn't watch much TV.

'The gendarmes have called for assistance,' Sanguetti said. 'Their colleagues will be here any moment.'

Adam let himself out onto the staircase and walked slowly down into the garden. From the foot of the steps he could see the journalists held protestingly in the library by the two policemen. He started forward when suddenly he saw the bent figure of Calixte Sorel come out of the shadows. 'Monsieur Garrison,' Sorel said quietly.

Adam stopped. 'A terrible shock for you,' he said 'How long had you worked for him?'

'Many years ' He stood close, his white hair caught in a shaft of light from a landing window. 'I've something to say, monsieur. I think it's best if I say it to you.'

'What is it?'

'Something I saw.'

'Okay, what?'

'After the shot was fired I saw someone leave the bedroom. Immediately after the shot.'

'You're saying it wasn't suicide?'

'It wasn't suicide, monsieur.'

'Was it Claudine Sanguetti leaving?'

'No. I saw Claudine leave before the shot was fired. Then the shot and immediately someone came down the stairs from the bedroom.'

'Did you get any details at all?'

'My eyes are bad, monsieur. A shadowy figure. Wearing dark clothes.'

Adam drew in a breath. 'Which way did this shadowy figure go?' The old man waved his hand in the shaft of light and seemed to catch it in his palm. 'It was a shape, a blur, monsieur. In a fraction of a second it had disappeared into the darkness.'

From where he stood Adam could see across to the mainland and the small convoy of cars, blue lights flashing as they approached the causeway along the coast road. 'I'm going to get out of here before the police arrive,' he said to the old man. 'Anything I can tell them can wait until tomorrow.'

Keeping to the darker parts of the garden, Adam had watched the police cars turn onto the single-track causeway, cross it with their lights sparkling on the almost motionless sea, then accelerate past the gatehouse to the main entrance to the villa. He guessed that the questioning of the twenty or more guests would take most of the night.

He was running over in his mind what Calixte Sorel had said. Of course, the old secretary might have been mistaken. His eyes were bad. But if there was no mistake it was murder.

An Agatha Christie murder, the guests cut off from the mainland by a causeway watched twenty-four hours a day by a security guard.

He would find out from the gateman how easy or difficult it was to get onto the island without using the causeway. But for the moment he could not see why Viklas would want to kill Midas. He held all the aces. He held Claire. Unless . . . Adam stopped for a moment in the shadows . . . unless Midas had told Steven Viklas he would not pay the ransom.

Emerging from the bushes by the gatehouse, he stopped and tapped on the window The gateman rose nervously from his chair, grabbing up his shotgun.

'The limousine fetched me from the airport,' Adam said. 'You remember? I was working for Monsieur Midasov.'

The man opened the door. 'Come in, monsieur,' he said politely. But he kept the shotgun in the crook of his arm. 'A terrible thing. I just heard.'

'I was employed by Monsieur Midasov to investigate the abduction of his daughter,' Adam said. 'Apart from the guests and the staff, did anyone else come to the island this evening?'

'You, of course.'

'True.'

'Anyone else?'

'Not unless they landed by boat on the other side of the island. But why these questions if Monsieur Midasov committed suicide?'

'The police will need to know.'

'I understand.' The gateman lit a cigarette. Relaxed now, he walked to the rear window, looking down the steep hillside to the sea. 'If anybody landed he still had the perimeter fence to climb,' he said, waving his cigarette. 'There's a second

fence surrounds the house, as you've seen. Both wired. Any attempt to cut the beach fence would be flashed up on that screen.' He gestured to the monitor on his desk.

'So it would have to be the causeway.'

'Have to be.'

'In plain sight.'

'We've never had as much as a sneak thief.'

Adam took from his pocket the envelope containing the computer-enhanced photograph. The picture was of Viklas and Zoya, head and shoulders only, a man in his late thirties, a woman nearing seventy. 'Just one last thing,' he said. 'Have you seen this man before?'

The gateman stared down. 'His picture was on *Télé-journal* tonight.'

'Forget television, think about him here. Do you recognise him as any of the temporary domestic staff? His hair dyed perhaps. Did you ever see him here?'

The gateman took the photograph, sucking on the cigarette. 'Never.' He exhaled. 'But that old lady was here tonight. Kitchen hand. Arrived late. Left ten minutes ago.'

34

Zoya Viklas got off the bus at Marseille's Gare St Charles. She felt perfectly calm. Calm in the certainty that she had done the right thing. The only thing. At a snack stand hung with coloured lights she bought a slice of pizza and a plastic cup of coffee. By the station clock she had ten minutes to wait for the next bus.

Carrying the pizza and coffee, she walked out round the edge of the untidy square. It was a hot night and the smells in the air were not those she was accustomed to in Paris. Even the exhaust fumes of the circling Lambrettas were unable to subdue the sharp tang of cooking spices. Groups of Arab men drifted past her, a few old French couples, and suddenly the brilliance of a dozen US sailors in whites, apologising drunkenly as they moved along the sidewalk.

She munched her pizza. Opposite her rose a familiar building. She frowned. How could that be? She had not noticed it earlier this evening. A big, intimidating, triumphal mass. Or rather, once intimidating. Crumbling now, ill-kempt. The concrete figures of heroic proletarians which flanked the door so familiar. Familiar not from France of course, but from Moscow and Leningrad when she was a girl. A pure piece of brute Stalinist architecture.

She walked closer and stopped thirty or forty metres away. A tall, severe, grey-haired woman in shabby clothes, she

stood reading the inscription cut in stone above the door. It read: 'Parti Communiste de Marseille'. She began laughing, laughing hard enough to spill her coffee.

On the night she had shot Joseph Midasov, fate had placed her outside this building Once it would have buzzed with brightly lit activity. But tonight it had a dark, eyeless quality, shifty and apologetic, deserted by the faithful, grown too old or too few, or too anxious for their supper, to give it life.

She breathed deeply. Midas dead by her own hand, and throughout the world the faith abandoned[1] She sat on the steps of the building and bit into her pizza. She had never thought to experience such a moment of triumph. Her coffee spilling, the crumbs of her pizza decorating her mouth, she sat hooting with laughter to the amazement of the Arabs moving silently by.

Adam paid off his taxi in the station forecourt. The sickness rose in his stomach each time he thought of the picture of Claire – muddied, bruised, crouching, terrified. At a run he crossed to where a line of cement posts flagged by green and white metal discs carried bus numbers. On the wall an illuminated map of the area showed routes. Of course, it was possible that Steven Viklas had been waiting for her in a car where the causeway joined the island. In that case there was no trail to follow.

But for reasons he couldn't put his finger on, no more, probably, than simple desperate hope, he refused to believe that Viklas had been waiting there. From the board above the ticket office he found the time for the next Paris train. Less than five minutes.

The train was waiting in the station. He reached the *quai* and ran along the platform, peering into each carriage. Then

climbed aboard at the far end and ran back through the carriages, his eyes searching every occupied seat. People stepped aside or were elbowed aside, or fell back in confusion before his muttered apologies. In the last carriage the conductor had been alerted, and with an assistant chased after the big man in the linen suit. The train had already begun to move. But as it picked up speed the last door was flung open and the foreigner leapt clear onto the last few yards of the platform.

Jogging down the platform, past the unmanned barrier, Adam regained the main station concourse. His eyes raked the faces of the people criss-crossing the tiled space. None of them resembled Zoya Viklas.

Dropping into a fast walk now, he passed under the station's nineteenth-century iron tracery and out onto the forecourt. If she wasn't going back to Paris (and if Steven Viklas had not met her with a car), that left what local transport she could pick up in the station yard. Wherever she was heading.

He looked again at the illuminated bus map. The only bus running along the coast road past the island was one coming from Sête. He looked down the line of green and white metal flags. Number 11 was inscribed Sête.

A man resting his back against the wall a few yards from the Number 11 stop looked as if he had been there for more than a few minutes. As Adam approached, he saw that the man was holding a litre bottle of wine.

Adam stopped before him, pushing a twenty-franc note into his hand. 'I'm looking for someone,' he said without ceremony. 'A woman.'

The man leered toothlessly.

'An elderly woman.' He took out the photograph and

folded it so that it showed only Zoya. 'She would have got off a bus here five or ten minutes ago. A number 11 from Sête.'

The man looked blankly at the picture. Turning his head as if he were about to spit on the floor, he lifted the wine bottle and swigged.

'You didn't see her? A woman of maybe seventy?'

The man sucked his lips. His eyes roved across the station forecourt.

Adam turned away. A pizza stand was parked across from the line of bus stops. He walked across. A small man in a striped apron stood at the bar. 'Pizza-frites, hamburger-frites, hot dog-frites . . . ?'

'Coffee,' Adam said. While the man worked the machine, Adam looked across the square. A massive concrete building lowered over one corner. People, mostly Arab men in groups of three and four, drifted along the pavements. 'I'm looking for this woman,' he said, pushing the photograph onto the counter as he took his coffee. 'You didn't see her get off an Ile d'Ipi bus in the last ten minutes or so?'

The stallholder flipped the picture round to look at it. 'I didn't see what bus she got off, but she was here a few minutes ago – tall, foreign woman. Bought a pizza and coffee.' The man puffed his cheeks. 'Half an hour perhaps. At most.'

'Then what?'

The man frowned. 'Then what?'

'What did she do next?'

'She walked over and sat on the steps of the PC headquarters eating the pizza and drinking the coffee and laughing like a madwoman. When she finished she gave me back the

plastic cup to throw in the garbage and caught the Salernes bus from the stop there.' He pointed to one of the green-flagged concrete posts.

Adam paid for the coffee. A line of taxis sat at the rank on the far side of the station entrance. 'Salernes,' he said to the pizza man, 'how far is it?'

'Forty kilometres maybe.' The man flipped crumbs from the counter with the side of his hand. 'But if you're looking for this old lady, tell your driver to put his foot down hard. This is not a stopping bus, monsieur. It takes the *autoroute* most of the way.'

Waking in darkness, Claire lay unmoving. It was an effort for her to open her eyes, a pointless effort in the blackness around her. Some time in the last hours the eyelids had begun to swell, moisture had seeped from them and dried in a crust which she was forced to brush away with her fingers before she could bring her eyes to open.

She knew she was deteriorating fast. It was not only her eyes. Her joints ached with a deep rheumatic numbness. Dehydration, kept at bay by lapping at a puddle in the floor at the farthest extent of her chain, still left her with a parched and swollen mouth. Her body was reduced to too many conflicting calls upon her nerve endings. Every part of her seemed to ache or sting or throb. She was not certain any longer whether she could speak; she was sure she could no longer cry.

She tried to still her thoughts. After fitful sleep, the process of reorientation was something she fought against. Reality was blackness and pain.

In the dusty room above the cellar where Claire was chained, Steven Viklas lay on an old US Army cot, hands

locked behind his head, staring up at the beamed ceiling, and dreamed.

Awake, he always dreamed the same dream. Put together from scraps and stories he had heard as a child, assembled in his own child's mind, it was the story of Joseph Midasov with his guards and whips and dogs. And the betrayal that had driven his mother mad. And had left him abandoned, at the mercy of the perverts at the Murmansk Orphanage and the other perverts who had adopted him when his Zoya was taken away in America. At Bridgewater State Hospital, where he had been treated as a teenager for assault on a girl, the psychiatrists had not believed him. They had bland words for his obsession with Joseph Midasov which made that obsession a disease. And he had railed against them until he had been locked up alone. When he had finally been let out on day release he had immediately absconded. He had changed identities more times than he could remember. Steven Woods, Jackson, Peters, Harper, Ross . . . but at core he was always Steven Viklas.

He was always Steven Viklas because the name of Brogula had taken its terrible icy grip on him. Stories from his childhood, stories from Zoya, haunted him. The wire, the work, the brutality of the guards. The tall, uniformed figure of Joseph Midasov staring out from the comfort and the warmth of his office at the long lines of *zeks*, cowled like monks against the ferocious bite of the Arctic cold.

He was aware that the camp had never had a physical location for him. It existed surrounded by its wooden towers and bright searchlights at a point on the tundra many hundreds of ice-miles from anywhere. In the world of a child's imagination it had taken the place of magic castles inhabited by evil lords. It was every haunted house rolled into one.

He had had little formal schooling. He could read, write, speak Russian, but it was only as a steward working the cruise liners that he had acquired, mostly from women passengers, any veneer of education. Single ladies on cruise ships often seemed imbued with a mission to enlighten and inform young stewards, and he had found that he learned easily.

Of course, he knew that some thought of him as not sane. But he had never, since he could remember, been sane in the way the rest of the world was sane. It was not something that in any way concerned him. What concerned him was Joseph Midasov's responsibility for the shape of his life. He, and now his daughter too, would have to pay the price. He found it immensely comforting to know that, if he listened carefully, he could hear her chain clank in the chalky mud of the cellar room below.

He could remember when the need to settle the score with Joseph Midasov had overwhelmed him. He had just returned from his first voyage, working a Russian cruise ship that carried Western tourists to the winter sun. He had seen some television coverage of Midasov and his daughter, filmed at the dedication of a monument in New York to 'the unknown *zek*' of the Soviet Union. That night his stomach had been torn by retching. It was then that he had begun to collect a scrapbook, of the liar and the fraud Midasov and his untouchably beautiful daughter.

But the moment he lived for had been long delayed. He had been rearrested in Massachusetts for assaulting a prostitute and returned to Bridgewater. Eight years he'd spent there while his mother finished her time across the river at Blair. This time he had behaved well; he had been granted ward freedom and had become a model detainee. A year

after his mother was released from Blair, he had been free to follow her to Paris.

But she had been a devastating disappointment to him. He found that the urge to destroy Midasov had been burnt out of her. She had even laughed at his plans to expose him. Who would believe, she had said, a crazy old woman and her son, both fresh from custody in Bridgewater and Blair? From that moment his plan had become fixed. He would show Zoya his strength of will, show her that he could destroy them both, Midasov and his daughter. The father destroyed in reputation; the daughter destroyed in her poise, her beauty, her confidence that the world was just. He would take it all from her; and, finally, life itself.

35

There was only one café still open in the dark tree-lined square at Salernes. In the Café de la Paix six or seven men in tee-shirts stood at the bar. A man and woman sat drinking coffee at the back. For the number of people in the long, slender bar the volume of noise was high. Most were arguing about the disputed result of a *boules* match on Saturday. A team from neighbouring Villecroze had snatched victory from Salernes at the last moment with a throw that was considered of doubtful validity. That much Adam understood as he eased his way up to the bar. Catching the barman's eye, he ordered coffee and a small cognac. The debate around him was beginning to lose its vivacity. There were a certain number of shrugging concessions made and more drinks were ordered. The barman slid Adam's coffee and cognac to him across the counter. 'Fifteen francs,' he said.

'Monsieur . . .' With the money Adam produced the photograph. In a voice loud enough to include his immediate neighbours, he asked if the woman was known to any of them.

The barman took the money, glanced at the photograph and shook his head. Others along the bar pressed forward and fell back when they saw it was an elderly woman.

'You should have asked Gaston, monsieur. If the lady lives around here, he could have told you. The one who just

left with his wife. He's the postman.'

Adam glanced towards the table, now empty, where the man and woman had been sitting. He had not noticed them leave behind him. Through the café window he saw an orange Citroën post van pull away from the kerb.

'Who is she, this old lady?' the barman asked. 'She's not from Salernes.'

'Would you know if she was?'

His lips burbled assent. 'Why are you looking for her?'

'Memory loss,' Adam said. He lifted his glass and tipped the last of the cognac onto the back of his tongue. Then froze in that position. He was looking, in the mirror behind the barman's head, at the reflection of a painting, a familiar combination of wire, watchtowers and snow.

He put the glass down slowly on the bar. Half turning, he pointed to the wall behind him. 'That painting,' he said to the barman, 'do you know who painted it?'

The man's eyebrows lifted with interest. 'Why? Is it worth anything?'

'It could be,' Adam said. 'Not a fortune, but that sort of thing sells well in Paris.'

'Strictly speaking, it's not my property,' the man said carefully. 'You make me an offer and I'll talk to my partner.'

'How long have you had it up there?'

'I've had it two or three months But it only went up a week or so ago. You could be the first on to a very promising deal.'

'Don't get too excited,' Adam said. He took out the folded photograph. 'It was painted by this woman, Zoya Viklas. Didn't your partner tell you that?'

The man shrugged. 'My partner's my wife,' he said, to the smiles of the others. 'She's got a soft heart. It appears an

old lady came in here a few times in the spring. Foreign accent. If I saw her I don't remember. One day when I was at the market my wife was behind the bar here. The old lady was short of the money to have her roof fixed after the spring storms. She had this picture with her. Said it was worth five hundred francs or more if you found somebody interested. So my wife bought it. Now I'm an art dealer.'

Adam felt a surge of triumph. 'Where does she live, the old lady?'

The man shrugged.

'But your wife knows?' Adam asked urgently.

'I asked her at the time. The old lady said she rented a farmhouse, a deserted place up in the hills. No water or electricity, she said.'

'Do you have any idea how far?'

'She said half an hour or more away. But by bus, walking, bicycle, I couldn't tell you.' He jerked his thumb at the painting. 'You're interested, uh?'

'A thousand francs,' Adam said. 'My first and last offer. Keep the picture safe for me. And where's the nearest Gendarmerie?'

The warm night air was thick with rosemary and thyme. Droves of white-winged moths frenetically circled the last street lights of the village below. The road, while it remained a road, was steep; when it dwindled into a gravelled path it climbed even more steeply between rocks and sparse bushes to the top of the moonlit hillside.

From where he stood next to the gendarmerie command vehicle, Adam could see police cars moving in four or five different directions. It had taken the active intervention of Jacobi on the phone from Paris to satisfy the Colonel of

Gendarmerie at Marseille that Adam was not fleeing from Midas's house. A fellow *polytechnicien* of Jacobi's, the colonel had been happy to let the old-school-tie connection work for Adam. He had issued orders to the local gendarmerie that Monsieur Garrison should be kept informed of every development in the search. The commander of the eighty-man gendarmerie brigade in the area was François Lacoste. Tall, impeccably uniformed, a man whose black hair and bandit moustache were greying rapidly under the weight of his fifty years, Lacoste had reacted with commendable speed. Within two hours extra men had been called in from neighbouring brigades. Photocopies of the computer-enhanced picture of Viklas and his mother had been distributed to every gendarme and every gendarmerie car engaged in the search. Their brief was to visit every village along the thirty-mile length of the hillside, to knock up the mayor, no matter what time of night it was, and to show the photograph. They had been told that gendarmerie headquarters in Marseille was certain that the missing Claire Midasov was being held in the old woman's house.

Fifteen kilometres away, on the Martelle road, a British Volvo pulled up and let out an old woman. The British occupants of the car, after a good dinner at Salernes, were driving back to their rented villa when their headlights had picked up the old lady walking along the country road. They had stopped to offer her a lift and she had accepted, sitting silently in the back of the six-seat Volvo while the occupants promised themselves lunch at a new restaurant tomorrow and a long afternoon in the sun. The old lady had smiled when questioned about her destination, but had seemed not to understand and the British had abandoned the questions. After about ten minutes they had approached a crossroads

and the old lady had indicated that this was where she wished to get out.

Unable to speak anything but the most rudimentary French, the British tourists had waved her good luck as she left them and started up a steep track into the sweet-smelling darkness.

Sitting in the dimly lit command vehicle drinking coffee with Lacoste, the radio messages crackling around their heads, Adam asked him: 'How long before we can hope to get some sort of a lead?'

The captain pulled at his ear. 'What's frustrating is to know her name but still not be able to pick up a trace of her in the area. If she were a real foreign owner it would be different. We'd have some record of her. A *carte de séjour* even. But we've nothing listed for a Zoya Viklas. If she paid electricity bills the EDF would have some sort of record. But a renter who probably doesn't even pay property taxes isn't easy to track down through the computer.'

'So the ground has to be covered, village to village. How long's that going to take?'

That depends on the area to be covered, monsieur. And that depends on how she left Salernes By car, moped, on foot? At the very least we're talking about sixty or seventy villages, hamlets and *lieux dit* in the area.' Lacoste poured more coffee. 'We'll cover them easily in the next few hours. By mid-morning at the latest. But you say the old lady lives in Paris. Perhaps she hasn't been here very often since she rented the house.'

'You mean even the mayor of the village might not know her by sight?'

Lacoste saw the tension on Adam's face. 'In summer the

population of the area triples. But if she lives in the area, we'll find the old lady for you, that's a promise, monsieur. And if we find the old lady, we'll find Mrs Garrison. That's also a promise.'

36

Jack Abbeline arrived from London during the night. He emerged from a gendarmerie jeep wearing jeans, a linen shirt and grey sweater. In the command vehicle he introduced himself to Lacoste in simple, efficient French and shook hands with Adam. For ten minutes he studied the area map with Lacoste and asked questions about the number of men deployed. Afterwards he led Adam outside and took a packet of small cigars from his pocket. 'I've got the report on Viklas from the FBI,' he said, lighting a cheroot. 'It doesn't make pretty reading. He's served long spells in a mental institution for violent assaults on women. He spent eight years in Bridgewater Hospital, Massachusetts, for having nearly killed a hooker in Boston. He's an unpredictably dangerous man.'

'Tell me something new. He killed Corby. Lili Sabatier.'

Abbeline plumed smoke into the night. 'What I mean, Adam,' he said slowly, 'is you have to be prepared. Jacobi gave me an account of your meeting with Zoya. From what you said we must crank in the idea that the death of Midasov may not have been part of her son's plan. It could relieve the pressure on Claire.' He paused. 'Equally, it could increase it.'

They walked up onto the bare hillside, keeping within call of the radio truck parked in an olive grove fifty yards below them. Stopping every now and again, they could see

lights from villages or hamlets dotted across the hills and ridges that stretched away east to the Alps. Many others were in darkness. If they turned to face south, the orange-pink light of Marseille glowed over in the direction of the sea.

When Abbeline asked him if he had been in touch with his brother, Adam nodded: 'He's certain Claire had no idea her father defected rather than escaped. I believe him. Claire was devoted to the myth of Midas the indomitable *zek*.'

'What will happen to your brother now?' Abbeline asked. 'I assume his career in the State Department is finished.'

Adam picked his way through scattered rocks and rosemary bushes. 'He'll get some downgraded appointment in a remote African embassy. He was already drinking too much to stay on anybody's list of high flyers.'

'A sad man, nevertheless.'

Adam looked at him and turned away.

'A man who's lost his sister, his wife, his career, all in a matter of weeks,' Abbeline mused. 'His brother, Jacobi tells me, he lost years ago. Is that so?'

Adam didn't answer.

'How long have you known Jacobi, Adam? Really well, I mean?'

'Four or five years? Why d'you ask?'

Abbeline dropped the cheroot and carefully stamped it out on the path. 'Just something Jacobi said when he met me in Paris.' He looked at Adam. 'He said friends of such long standing should know more about each other than he knows about you.' He paused. 'Reasonable, you think?'

'Was he talking about Tom and me?'

'I think he was talking about *Claire* and you.' He smiled. 'Think about it.'

Adam had walked on a few steps while Abbeline took

another cheroot from his pack and lit it. From the olive grove below them came the muffled staccato of Lacoste's units exchanging radio messages. Somewhere close a cigale trilled relentlessly. Adam stared out towards the blob of light over Marseille. He was thinking of the summer afternoon over four years ago in the gardens of a rambling old house on Martha's Vineyard. The sun, the glitter on the flat ocean, the twenty or thirty young men and girls, lawyers, doctors, getting gently drunk and amorous . . .

The whole thing had been laid on by the girl Tom was about to marry. A weekend party at the house her father had rented for her, a Portuguese couple to handle the gigots roasting on spits over the huge pit of glowing embers. All laid on by Claire Midasov, the girl he was about to meet for the first time. The girl he thought he was about to meet for the first time. It all seemed a lifetime ago.

Kate Kavanagh had met him at the gate and led him into the garden. 'Did you know Tom's bringing your father and Corby from Boston? I think,' Kate said, in her measured way, 'it means we're going to get the marriage announcement this afternoon.'

She was doing her best to look cheerful but Adam had some idea what she was feeling. Three months ago she and Tom had been seeing each other in a fairly serious way. Then Kate had made the mistake of introducing Tom to her best friend.

But Adam thought he knew that Tom would never have married Kate anyway. This girl Claire Midasov, daughter of a powerful and wealthy father, was much more to his taste. Walking beside Kate, Adam wanted to say something, some acknowledgment of what she must be feeling now. He slid

his arm through hers. 'You're looking good, Katie,' he said. 'The tan suits you.'

She smiled wryly and led him through the gardens. 'Now let's see . . . where is she?' She scanned the groups of people in the garden. 'There . . .' she pointed to a blonde girl surrounded by three or four men . . . 'that's Claire.'

Adam had stopped dead.

'What is it, Adam?'

'That's Claire. Jesus!'

'You know her?'

He had pulled himself together. 'Not really. Met her once briefly, in Spain a couple of years ago. She probably doesn't even remember. Listen, I'm dying for a drink, Kate,' he said. 'Can we get one before the introductions?'

'Sure.' Kate had glanced at him curiously. She was too quick to be completely taken in but she had asked no more questions.

Which was good because he had few answers to give her. Few ways of describing what an impact his one meeting with a girl in a small southern Spanish town over two years ago had made on him.

He had been driving through the small town of Cabata, in the hills behind Málaga, when he had been held up by some local festival, his car directed to a parking spot on the main square. A festive air enveloped the town. Banners draped the lamp-posts and metal crowd barriers lined the sidewalks as the young bulls were driven by the Andalusian horsemen on their sleek greys.

Brass band music blasted like heat through the sunlit square. He had seen her, heard her speaking in English as the first bulls were driven through the narrow streets. But the flimsy aluminium barriers had burst under the first surge

and clatter of hoofs. Within seconds the panic was uncontrollable. Men and women fled among the café tables to the protection of a balconied café terrace. Young, but still enormous, the black Andalusian bulls galloped and turned, flinging their heads wildly from side to side. He saw the American girl run and trip and without time to think he had hurled a café chair at the huge tossing head.

It had enough effect to divert the animal. In the two seconds in which the bull pulled back, snorting, the girl had scrambled to her feet and jumped like a gazelle for the iron balcony, pulled herself up and rolled over the rail onto the terrace.

He joined her. There were still two bulls loose in the square below. Most people had retreated to the terrace or were safely behind cars and makeshift barriers. The bulls were being hunted up the narrow side streets.

They had stood together, breathing heavily. 'Thanks,' she said. 'Not as elegant as a matador's cloak, but I think that chair saved my life.'

He thought she was extraordinarily beautiful, in her mid twenties, a few years younger than himself. 'Carnage averted,' he said. 'You could do with a drink.'

'I could.' She reached up and kissed him on the lips. 'Thanks again for the very timely chair.'

They were standing on the raised café terrace. He took her hands. He could swear they were both aware of the heightened consciousness of the moment. Then suddenly below them women shrieked as another clatter of hoofs across cobbles rivetted their attention.

A bull had emerged from one of the side streets. Frightened and wild, red-eyed, it galloped across the square, tossing its long horns at a woman running before it.

She went down almost immediately below them, blood spreading quickly on the dusty cobbles. While the horsemen drove the bull back into the side streets, Adam was among the group of men who leapt down from the terrace. Kneeling beside the Spanish woman, he pulled keys from his pocket and threw them to the man he took to be the husband. 'I'll drive her to Málaga. That's my car. Open the back.'

He wrapped his linen jacket around the woman's bleeding leg. While the husband fumbled open the door of his car, Adam lifted the woman off the cobbles. Blood streamed down his khaki trousers. As he ran to the car, he twisted his head towards the girl. 'I want to meet you again,' he shouted.

'I want to meet you,' she called to him. 'Marbella. The Marbella Club.'

He handed the Spanish woman into the back of the car. 'I'll go there straight from the hospital,' he yelled across the space between them, and ducked behind the wheel.

'Please,' the Spanish woman's husband urged him from the back seat. 'Fast as you can, señor, *por Díos*.'

When he delivered the woman to the hospital, the police were waiting. A statement would be necessary, he was told. He was obliged to go to police headquarters for it to be taken formally. But there was a problem. Spanish law required the statement to be in Spanish. This necessitated the services of a notarised translator. For two hours he sat as the sun went down and a *guardia* gave him soft drinks and coffee while they waited for the translator. He was allowed to make two calls to the Marbella Club but he could tell from the background noise that no one there was going to single out a nameless girl, who anyway would have changed clothes by then.

The translator had insisted she first finish her dinner.

When she arrived, the statement-taking and the translation seemed to last for ever. Leaving the police, Adam drove at eighty miles an hour along the coast road to Marbella. It was after midnight when he ran into the club. At reception they couldn't help him. At the main bar, one of the barmen said he was sure he had seen her. Very good-looking American girl. She had sat at a table in the corner reading, from just after six this evening until a few minutes ago. Always looking up towards the door if someone came in. At midnight she had gone. Without leaving any message.

In the garden on Martha's Vineyard Kate had taken Adam across to Claire. She had looked up when they were still a few paces away and walked through the group surrounding her to stand in front of him, shaking her head in smiling recognition.

'Adam tells me you two know each other already,' Kate said.

Claire reached out both hands and took his. 'Cabata,' she said.

'The police kept me till midnight making a statement.'

'And I thought you'd decided not to come.'

When Kate left them they took a bottle of wine and glasses and found an unoccupied stretch of garden wall overlooking the ocean to sit on. She poured wine for both of them and he lifted his glass to her.

She raised her glass and pressed it for a few moments strongly against his. Then she drank.

'Pretty damn strange, uh?' she said, looking out across the ocean.

'Pretty damn strange,' he said.

'So.' She flicked her hair back with a movement of her head, a movement meant to clear the shadows of the past.

'Can you tell me why Tom hasn't turned up yet? He's supposed to be bringing Corby and your Dad.'

'And we're all expecting an announcement.'

She looked at him. 'Yes, we're all expecting an announcement.'

The sun went down across the ocean and the Portuguese couple served the lamb. The band arrived and people started dancing. Claire and Adam danced together on the terrace. They had not been apart since he arrived.

It was an hour later that Tom's car turned into the drive. When he got out it was with Corby but not his father.

'Where is he?' Adam said. 'Nothing wrong, is there?'

'That's for you decide,' Tom said sharply. He sent Corby off with a couple she knew well and turned on Adam. 'I have to speak to you,' he said. 'Can we be private in the living-room, Claire?'

'I don't see why not.'

'You'd better come too,' he said to her. Then to Kate: 'Maybe your opinion could be useful. The guests can wait a little longer.'

Adam knew his brother relished being the centre of any drama and he responded with a shrug as Kate lifted her eyebrows at him.

In the living-room Tom faced them. 'We have a crisis on our hands, Adam,' he said.

'What sort of crisis?'

'When I got to the house Dad was still out,' Tom said slowly. 'I wasn't sorry because it gave me a chance to tell Corby on her own that I was being posted to London.'

'She took that pretty hard, I imagine,' Kate said. She was leaning against the bookcase, her chestnut hair gleaming reddish in a shaft of light.

'She burst into tears,' Tom said.

'She's close to you, Tom, you expect that,' Kate said. 'But she's got her life there in Boston with her friends . . .'

'What do you know about her life there in Boston?' Tom had asked aggressively.

'Just a moment,' Adam intervened. 'You said we have a crisis on our hands. I know it hasn't been ideal for Corby living alone with Dad. There have been fights . . .'

'You don't know the half of it,' Tom said coldly. 'The bastard has been making demands of her.' His face was white with fury.

'Wait a minute,' Adam said. 'I'm not understanding this.'

'You understand.'

'Are you crazy?' Adam exploded. 'What are you saying, Tom?'

'He's been making her do things to him.'

'She's lying,' Adam snapped. 'Jesus Christ, the little bitch!'

'If you'd heard her, seen her, you would know she's not lying.'

Kate saw Adam make an effort to keep calm. 'For Christ's sake, Tom,' he said carefully, 'use your common sense. We both know your going to London is a bad blow for Corby. We all know that the air these days is full of parental abuse accusations. Corby's more than capable of putting two and two together. She's been a calculator since she was four.'

'Jesus, if you weren't my brother . . .!'

'Listen, Tom,' Kate said. 'What Adam's saying isn't impossible.'

'You too? You believe she's capable of something as downright evil as accusing her own father just to get to London? You're out of your mind!'

Claire stayed silent, looking from one to the other.

'What I'm saying,' Kate said carefully, 'is that it's within possibility. It shouldn't be dismissed out of hand.'

'And what do I do in the meantime? I leave her with some dirty old man trying to paw her and get her to jerk him off?'

Adam swung him round, his fist clenched. With an effort he dropped his hands to his side. 'Watch your tongue,' he said with slow emphasis. 'You are not the fucking judge and jury here.'

'Then who is? You, from a comfortable seat at some sidewalk café in Paris?'

'I'll stay till this is sorted out,' Adam said.

'There's no sorting out to be done.'

Adam breathed in deeply. 'Look, what we'll do first off is ask Kate to talk to Corby. Maybe Claire too, if that's okay.'

Claire nodded.

'We'll get their opinions first, then maybe you and I will talk to her. The important thing is not to rush it. The most important thing of all is that the old man hears nothing yet.'

'Too late,' Tom said.

Adam's mouth dropped. For years afterwards Kate remembered that she had never seen a man's face drain so completely of colour. 'You told him what she said.' His voice sounded hollow with shock.

'I faced him with it,' Tom said, his chin coming up.

'And you're proud of it? You goddamn prig!'

'You haven't asked what he said.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing. He turned round and walked out of the room.'

'What did you expect a man like that to do, for God's sake, get down on his knees before you and plead his innocence? I'm going,' he said.

'Where?'

'To Boston. Where else?' He turned to Kate and Claire. 'Please. Talk to Corby for me, will you? See what you think.'

He had found his father on the back porch. This tall, upright military man whom he'd respected all his life, even when he didn't agree with him, was sobbing out his innocence. A photograph of Adam's mother lay on the floor at his feet.

Adam put his arm around him. 'Listen, Dad,' he said. 'I don't believe a word of it.'

His father turned his crumpled face towards him. 'Tom does.' He snapped his fingers. 'Just like that. He never even gave me a chance to speak.' He was fighting to control his voice. 'The names he called me . . . went in like knives,' he whispered. 'Surely Corby couldn't have said things like that.'

They had talked and drunk bourbon together until late into the night. Twice Adam had phoned Tom to ask him to speak to his father, but Tom had refused. Once he had spoken to Kate. Her opinion was that Corby was fantasising, maybe even just plain lying. But it had meant nothing to his father. It was Tom he wanted to hear from. So they had drunk more bourbon and talked about the days when Adam's mother was alive and about Tom as a boy and his father's time in Korea.

In the morning, when Adam had pulled himself out of bed and stumbled along to his father's room, he found it had all been to no purpose. In the thick-walled old house he had not even heard the pistol-shot that had ended his father's life.

At the funeral he had found it impossible to speak to Tom. Afterwards he had gone back to Paris. And Tom had left for London with Corby. A month later he had received an

invitation to the wedding. He could still remember the shock of seeing Claire's name on the stiff white card. He had thrown it into the trash can.

Most of their friends saw it as a natural alliance. The wealth that Claire would inherit in the not too distant future allied to the sheer talent that had marked Tom out from his peers. At first, Midas had greatly approved.

Claire had called Adam just before the wedding and asked him to come. She had called him from London every couple of months with an invitation to stay, or to go skiing with them, or to spend a couple of weeks on Midas's island. Each time he had said no. Each time it had been more of a wrench. Then she had stopped calling. He found he preferred it like that.

It had been a few days before Christmas, perhaps two years after the marriage, when Claire had called him in Paris. 'I'm in a hotel round the corner,' she said. 'I'm over from London to see my father. I'll be at your office in ten minutes. I think it's time we had a drink together.'

They had drunk beers in cafés on the Ile St Louis and talked about meeting in Cabata, becoming more open as alcohol loosened their tongues. 'You ruined my holiday,' Claire said, sipping her beer. 'Come to think of it, you ruined a lot more than that.'

A drink or two had slipped into dinner as Claire had begun to unburden herself about Corby. 'Quite simply,' she said, over brandy and coffee, 'she's everything you said she was. She'd manipulate her way out of Alcatraz. It's pitiful to see Tom being spun around her finger.'

'You're not, I hope, suggesting there's anything I can do to help.'

She had looked at him across the candlelit table for a long

time. 'Nothing obvious, Adam,' she had said. 'Don't worry.'

He was still pretty sober at that time. 'Tell me,' he said, to change the subject, 'about Kate.'

'She's my best friend,' Claire said.

'Still?'

'Still?' She paused. 'You're asking me do I feel bad about Kate,' Claire said. 'The answer is yes. I don't know why I agreed to start seeing Tom that summer. Perhaps for no other reason than that Kate already had him. Or seemed on the edge of having him. Such a splendid prize, I thought, was my due, not hers. After all, she was just a bright kid from the mean streets of north Dublin. No money, no family. Why should she inherit the earth?'

'You're being hard on yourself,' he said.

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. I really don't think so.'

In the taxi she held his hand, her face turned away, looking unhappily out into the darkness. He paid off the taxi and they went into her hotel and drank coffee and brandy in the bar. 'You're not saying a lot,' he said.

'There's not much more to say,' she said. 'Except to ask you if you'll stay with me tonight. Just this one night?' She said it with no more ceremony than that.

In her room they had stood close and he had kissed her, their mouths opening and closing on each other until she pulled her head back, gasping. 'You know I love you,' she said. 'I suppose that's really what I came to Paris to tell you.'

He stood away from her. It was a time when he still smoked. He lit a cigarette and walked across to the window and looked out over the night roofs of Paris. He could hear her beginning to undress behind him. 'Wait,' he said.

She stopped. He watched her in the window's reflection

trail her skirt round her like a matador's cloak. For a moment she lifted her eyes to him. Then she stepped back into her skirt and zipped it up.

'Your brother's wife. Is that it?' she said.

He turned to face her, shaking his head. 'I don't owe Tom any favours.'

She stood in the middle of the room, buttoning her shirt. 'So what's the problem?'

'The problem is, Claire, that if we spent the night together, I'd want you to stay on in Paris.'

She had walked over to stand in front of the mirror, her lips pursed. 'I've thought about that, too. I've thought about it a lot.'

'And . . . ?'

'It had to come up tonight. I suppose I wanted it to.' She paused. 'But I couldn't do that to Tom,' she said.

'For Christ's sake . . .'

'I've nothing to hate Tom for,' she said. 'Not the way you hate him.'

He looked at her in bafflement as she turned to face him. 'But you could do this . . .' he said. He gestured to the room, the bed.

'Are you shocked?'

He shook his head. 'Not shocked.'

'People do these things,' she said. 'Simply because they want to. Or feel they need to.'

'That's good enough reason?'

She turned to face him. 'It's good enough reason because I love you, Adam. Because I think you love me. Because I know, after talking to you tonight, that you do. It's not at all hard to feel ' She walked towards him. 'Perhaps it was our impossibly romantic meeting in Spain. Perhaps I've taken a

long time to grow up. I don't know.'

What are you saying, Claire, for God's sake? How can you talk like this and still go back to Tom?'

She had stopped in front of him. She reached out to touch him, then dropped her hand to her side. 'I'm saying that when I married Tom I knew what I was doing. Tom was headed for the heights. Still is maybe.'

'And?'

'I suppose it was a kind of compact. Two very ambitious people.'

'Compacts can be broken.'

'Not this one. Tom's done nothing to deserve me breaking it like this.'

'Like this?'

'With you. I'm saying I just don't have the right to destroy all that Tom's aiming for by announcing I'd sooner spend my life with his brother. Not with just any other man, but with his brother.' She looked at him. 'Staying on in Paris is not on the agenda, Adam.'

'Then maybe you shouldn't have even thought of calling me tonight.'

'Perhaps,' she said, 'I shouldn't even have wanted to call you tonight. Perhaps I let the drink carry me away. It's not a good life, living there with Tom and Corby.'

'It's not a problem I'm prepared to help with. Not on a part-time basis. I'm not going to be on stand-by as the occasional stud. That's your father's idea of a solution, not mine.'

'You know nothing about my father, Adam,' she said quietly. Walking to the door she held it wide open. She smiled at him, then reached up and kissed him on the lips. For a moment she kept her arms tight round his neck, so tight she

trembled. Then she released him. 'Now fuck off out of my life, darling,' she said softly, 'or I'll be forced to call the house detective.'

When Abbeline came and joined him as he looked out over the hills towards the lights of Marseille, Adam tried to explain something of what had happened between him and Tom.

Between himself and Claire.

For a long time Abbeline stood in silence, nodding. 'Let's go,' he said after a few moments. 'See what Captain Lacoste has for us.'

37

She no longer had any clear idea how long she had been in the cellar, though she made constant promises to herself, as she drifted in and out of sleep, to keep some account of the passing of the hours.

But she was awake now. Something was different. She pushed herself into an upright position. She could hear pacing across the plank floor above her head. In the darkness she listened. The footsteps were light, surely not a man's tread, moving restlessly about the room above, never still

Then a voice, a woman's voice. Claire forced herself to her feet. The length of chain enabled her to take a few paces only, but enough to get to the corner of the room. There, in the light of yesterday's kerosene lamp, she had seen that the thick-planked ceiling between the heavy beams was badly cracked. She had also seen a battered wooden chest on its side by the door.

Feeling forward in the dark she located the chest and dragged it into the corner under the cracked boards. Even from where she was she could hear the woman's voice more clearly.

Pulling the chest into the corner of the room, she climbed laboriously onto it. The chain pulled tight on her ankle, threatening to bring her down, but raising herself to her full height she found she could steady herself against a rough

beam and lift her head to just below the planking.

The voice was suddenly clear. 'That girl is innocent of any crime against us. Or against our family,' the woman said in Russian.

A charge of excitement passed through Claire. The woman remained near the corner of the room. 'I went down to see her. She was sleeping. To hold her down there, like a beast in the darkness, is an act of madness, my son,' the woman said 'I was a *zek* myself, remember. I've spent days, weeks chained in the punishment box. I want no part in chaining a girl to the wall to force her father to denounce himself. You ask why I'm here. It's to tell you, Stefan, that there's no longer any point in keeping her prisoner. It's too late, Stefan . . . now you must choose.'

Claire waited for Viklas to answer. As the silence extended for second after second, she found herself straining upwards, listening, but with the eerie certainty growing upon her that the woman had been talking to herself.

After a few moments, Claire climbed down in the total blackness and stood shaking against her cell wall. There was no further sound from above. Some instinct told her that her fate stood at a crossroads. Things were happening unplanned by Viklas. She felt hope; but she saw danger. She ran through her mind what little she had seen of the cellar from the few moments Viklas had been there with the lamp. First, that the room was no more than a space cut out of soft limestone rock. Then, that the chain holding her was attached to a massive staple driven into a timber support for the cross-beam which held up the floor above. Apart from the door in which he had stood, there was a second door at the far end of the cellar, beyond her reach. The door, roughly framed in timber, was set deep into the hacked-out limestone. No more

than a cupboard perhaps but, if she strained forward to the limit of the chain, she could feel a draught of cold air flowing from under it.

Following the links back to the wall, she explored the staple with her fingers. In the darkness it presented a horseshoe of unbreakable steel. The staple's points were sunk deep into the timber beam. With her nails she scratched desperately at the wood, trying to split off splinters from around the staple's points. But within minutes her nails had broken and she could feel the slippery wetness of blood.

Kneeling, she swept her hand across the damp, chalky floor until she found an embedded stone. For a few minutes she worked at it, scraping the soft chalk from around it until she was able to dig under it and lift it free. It was small but dense, a piece of rock more than a smooth-faced stone. Tearing strips from her shirt, she wrapped them around the stone and again located with her hand the staple deep in the timber beam. Letting the chain take her weight, she began to tap, first one side of the staple, then the other.

Even wrapped in the cloth, the stone made a dull but clearly audible clink against the staple. For five minutes or more she tapped stone on metal, but to no apparent effect. Hauling with all her strength on the chain produced no movement at all.

She rested her shoulder against the stone wall. Waves of fear, of nausea, of fatigue, most of all of hopelessness, overwhelmed her. Sick with hunger, sick with terror, she slid down the wall into a sitting position.

She forced down the panic. Forced herself to think. Tried to see herself as Claire Garrison, talking with colleagues at the office . . . driving her BMW down the King's Road. She was fighting for some sense of proportion. For her own sanity

she tried to erase the last hours and recreate the man she had met in Moscow, the totally unfrightening man she had sat with by the river at Strand oh the Green. But Steven Ross was gone for ever. She saw now only Steven Viklas in the hotel at Beaumont, or here in the cellar, pushing her back with his boot as he wielded his camera.

And she saw herself only as a wet, crouching, exhausted woman, begging him for life.

There were no sounds upstairs now. But as she sat in silence she thought she heard, or perhaps conjured up, a scraping at the head of the staircase. Then the creak of a footstep on the stairs outside the door made her start in terror.

A moment later yellow light gleamed through the cracks in the door, and it opened to reveal a woman holding a lamp above her head.

She was a tall, startlingly dominant figure in a long black overcoat and mud-stained boots. Her grey hair was pulled back from a narrow, handsome face, and she stared down at Claire unsmilingly. Without speaking she stepped forward into the cellar, and as the light swung Claire could see the pale eyes and the angles of her face. She had no doubt who it was.

'It fills me with shame,' Zoya Viklas said, 'that my son has done this to you ' It was a statement, but devoid of any emotion.

Claire shielded her eyes against the rays of the lamp. 'Help me ' The words were no more than half formed in her parched mouth.

'Joseph Midasov's daughter,' the woman said to herself. Her accent was heavy, Russian. 'Joseph Midasov's daughter,' she repeated. 'If there were any sanity left in this world, I would leave you to die. Kill you myself even.' She smiled

her cold smile. 'You were a child when I last saw you. That day at your father's great house. For me the last day of liberty as a young woman. In the end,' she mused, lifting the lamp higher, 'in the end I spent more time in a Western asylum than I spent at Brogula itself. Ironic, you must think?'

Claire backed away from her until the chain brought her up with a jerk.

'We have a few moments to talk. Stefan is sitting in his car in the woods. He follows the police search on his radio.'

'The key,' Claire said in a surge of panic. She pointed to the clasp on her ankle. 'The key,' she croaked from a parched throat.

'He's taken it with him,' Zoya said.

'Then get the police, I beg you. Get the police.'

Zoya came closer. 'My own son . . .' she said, as if to herself. Her head moved slowly from side to side.

Claire looked up at her. Was she offering sympathy?

'What binds us together,' Zoya said slowly, 'is that we are all at the mercy of the same current.' She nodded in self-confirmation. 'You, me, Stefan . . . Midas even. All at the mercy of Russia's unforgiving past. We can't escape. None of us can escape. You know the old proverb: a river carries its sour silt downstream.'

Claire rested her back against the cold wall, trying to keep her aching eyes focused on the woman in front of her, not understanding.

'Do you remember that day at your father's house, child? The fine house outside Boston?'

Claire shook her head.

'Do you not remember me coming there? You were a child, of course. I came with Steven to see your father. You were sitting with your mother under the trees, drinking

lemonade. You remember that day, surely?'

Again Claire shook her head, but images were beginning to flicker through her brain. Of the house. Of her mother there. Of Midas. And of this woman arriving. With her son. With Steven Viklas.

'Perhaps, at the time,' Zoya said, 'it's true that I was a little mad. Full of hatred. I came to kill him, of course. I never thought about myself. Never thought about Stefan. Close your eyes, little girl, and you'll remember that day . . .'

Open-eyed, Claire heard the shot. Saw herself running on six-year-old matchstick legs past her mother, through the great hall and into the library. Her father was slumped across the huge ornate desk. This woman, younger, had thrown aside the gun and was walking from the room. And Claire and the boy, the serious-faced boy who had faded in and out of her memory ever since that party at the Yusupov Palace in Moscow, had stood shocked and excited, side by side.

Then people came and Midas was groaning and swearing. Taking charge even though he had been shot. Directing that the police should not be called. But his wife had already called them.

'You tried to kill my father.' Claire raised her voice, searing her throat.

'I failed,' Zoya said 'Worst of all I failed my son. Left him dependent on charity . . . left him to be adopted by sadists.'

Claire raised her head. 'Your son's a murderer.' She strained to raise her voice above a croak. 'Your son's a murderer!' The words crackled into a whisper.

For a moment their eyes were locked together. 'And so am I,' Zoya said quietly. 'Listen to me, child.' The Russian

woman's tone was matter-of-fact. 'Tonight I went to his villa to shoot Midas dead.'

Claire shook her head in disbelief.

'This time I succeeded.'

Claire fell back against the wall, her shoulders scraping and tearing on the rough stonework.

Zoya lifted the lamp and moved closer. 'You must not weep, child,' the Russian woman said earnestly. 'It was the right thing to do. It was just. It was right. I know it.'

Claire's lips moved, but no words came.

'Midas's death completes an equation. You must believe he richly deserved it. And with your father dead . . .' Zoya stared down at Claire with wide, unblinking eyes . . . 'With your father dead,' she said earnestly, 'Stefan has no reason to hold you here, don't you see? I talked to the American who came to my apartment in Paris. I knew he was right. I must do something. And this was the only means I had of helping you. Stefan will come to understand that. You have no cause to fear, child. No cause to fear.'

They both turned their heads as they heard door hinges squeal above. 'I must go. I must tell Stefan that everything has changed,' Zoya said, swinging the lamp as she turned for the stairs. 'He must understand there is no reason to keep you any longer.'

In the darkness, Claire lay back against the wall. Misery as much as fear swamped her like an anaesthetic. She tried not to think about what Zoya had just told her. She wanted only to curl up on the wet floor and close her eyes. Yet some last remnant of strength or sanity recognised these symptoms of defeat. They were trying to destroy her. The mother as much as the son. Destroy her body and her mind. Midas, she told herself, was not dead. If she refused to let what Zoya

had told her reach the functioning parts of her mind, she could still hold defeat at bay. She would believe nothing Viklas had said about her father, nothing Zoya had just told her. At this moment, she told herself, belief in her father was all she had. Belief in her father. And belief that he was still alive.

Above she could hear their voices, distant as if in some back room. She had no doubt she was close to death. She thought of Midas, of that driving will. She asked herself what he would do if he were her. She knew only that he would not have let himself be battered to death like a rat on the cellar floor. Grasping the chain, she pulled herself to her feet.

The adrenalin was pumping again. She was trembling, sick with anxiety but willing herself to fight back. As she had grasped the chain to pull herself to her feet she had felt something. It took a second to register. A faint movement in the staple set in the wooden beam. She took the chain in both hands and leaned back, putting all her weight on it. She had little strength but when she jerked hard she was sure the staple moved fractionally. Changing position so that she was pulling from the other direction, she repeated the process. Again she detected a faint movement of the metal points in the wood.

As she worked in the darkness she could hear that Viklas and Zoya had moved into the room above. There was no need for her to crouch close to the planked ceiling to listen.

'You must let the girl go.'

'Let her go? Are you mad, woman?' Viklas's voice said in Russian. 'She stays down there until her father speaks.'

'Her father's dead.' The woman's cold voice cut through to the cellar. 'Let the girl go.'

Above her head Claire heard a chair crash over and a scuffle of footsteps across the floor.

'There's no reason to keep her now.' The woman's voice rose. 'What I did tonight, I did for you. It's wrong that you should keep her here. Let her go, Stefan. What use is she to you now?'

Claire stopped moving. Above there was silence. In her mind's eye she saw the two facing each other across the room. She heard the words he was speaking, low and menacing but incomprehensible. Then the woman's voice – shrill, not beseeching: 'No, Stefan! I did it for you, I killed him for you!'

And Claire, in total darkness, seemed to see his arm raised above his mother's face and the grey blur of a fist or bludgeon as it came down. Staring up at the planking, she followed the thudding of the blows with mute, shocked movements of her head. Then suddenly Steven Viklas was shrieking like a man in agony, shrieking on a high animal note as he ran from the house.

For half an hour she worked desperately in the darkness, pulling from one side, stumbling to the far end of the chain's reach and pulling from the other, each time increasing the unseen play of metal on bruised wood. She knew he would be back.

She was close to defeat when she gave the final tug, felt the staple ease and the chain come rattling to the chalk floor. She wanted to cry out, not in triumph, but relief. She was free to move. Gathering up the chain, she listened at the door to the staircase. In the silence she pushed it open. Through the open door above a light from a lamp illuminated a wooden staircase.

She climbed the few steps until her eyes were on a level

with the floor of the room above. A lamp spilled yellow light onto the face of the Russian woman, the head at a grotesque angle to the body, the eyes staring, no more than a few feet from Claire's head.

38

Paralysed with horror as she stared at the dead face in front of her, Claire heard without registering it the sound of footsteps approaching the house. When a door opened, she barely had time to pull back, to descend the stairs into the cellar before she heard his voice in the room above. He was, she realised, mumbling to himself the words of the Russian mass for the dead.

She picked up the chain and ran into the corner of the cellar. Instinct took her to her old position, backed against the cellar wall. The instinct to fight for her life. When he came into the cellar she was crouched, her back against the beam, covering the place where the staple had been wrenched out.

He stood inside the open door, holding a lamp at shoulder height. The beams from it reached out across the pale muddy floor, yellowing the milky puddles; light engulfed his head, catching his pale eyes in a mad flare of yellow, like a cat's eyes at night. Even in her fear she could see how he had changed. It was as if his face had been hollowed by defeat. From time to time he shook his head and mumbled words she did not understand. She knew he was infinitely dangerous.

She stood up slowly, using her body to cover the place where the staple had been ripped out. 'There's nothing left

for you now, Steven,' she said. 'No reason for you to keep me here any longer.'

'For years your father got away scot-free. You won't, Claire.' His head was shaking from side to side. He straightened up. He had begun to swing the lamp, first slowly, then faster, in wide circles above his head. She was transfixed, waiting for him to release the handle, waiting for the lamp to fly across the room and explode against the wall above her head, engulfing her in fire. As he swung the lamp faster, his eyes left her for a second, following the flame circling above his head as it began to roar in the glass funnel.

It was the second she needed. When the chain hit him, curling round his face, he reeled face down onto the foot of the stairs, screaming in anger.

For a moment she was incapable of moving. His back was arched towards her, the lamp beneath him throwing his huge shadow. She felt a tug on the chain, felt him pull her towards him, and summoned all her strength. Dragging the chain from under him, she swung it down across his back as he began to rise. She heard it thud heavily in the shadowed darkness, saw the flick of the chain disappear beneath him like a serpent's tail, and then the whole cellar burst into a sunburst of light as the lamp shattered.

She fell back in terror. The room seemed full of sound – his cries, her own screams, and the roaring and spitting of the kerosene flames that surrounded the doorway. His body was wreathed in smoke, his burning arm flailed the air. Turned away from her, he plunged through the flames, crashing and stumbling up the already blazing stairs.

She found she was crouched again in the corner of the room. Time, perhaps not more than a few seconds, had

passed, but the flames round the doorway had already reached up to the boarding between the heavy beams that supported the ceiling. In the thick, smoke-blackened flames, she could just make out the low door on the far side of the cellar. Perhaps no more than a cupboard cut in the chalky rock. Dragging the chain with her, she reached it and slid the bolt. As the door swung outwards cold air roared past her to feed the flames. Her cry seemed to echo out away from her. She forced her feet forward. In the flickering light of the flames behind her she felt as if she stood on the threshold of some gigantic basilica or the cavernous nave of some unimaginably huge Gothic cathedral.

The floor was flat, easy to traverse. Before her, steps appeared and vanished again in the uncertain light. Trailing the chain, she descended thirty or forty feet.

On her right hand was a stone column – smooth stone, uncarved. As the red light of the flames filled the rectangle of doorway above, she moved behind the column, then, feeling the presence of another, she eased her way between them. Crouching, she looked up.

All around her the darkness rose, revealing columns of stone and the shadows cast by great hanging stalactites. The umber beams from the doorway disclosed a huge subterranean world of crack and crevice, towering cliff and unimaginable abyss.

In the doorway, flames crackled and spurted as parts of the burning house fell into the cellar. From where she knelt the shadows gathered and dispersed or moved like swirling fog across the huge cavern. As she watched, the fire settled, and in deep silence the long red beams travelled up and out, past towering rock formations to be

lost in the infinite blackness of the cavern, travelled outwards and died.

Overwhelmed by a sense of being a lone observer at some vast galactic display, she crouched unmoving, until, with a final rumble, the roof of the house collapsed into the cellar, extinguishing the last of the flames. The only sound now in the vast, contracting space was the constant drip, drip of water all around her. Then the light of the last embers died in the doorway and she was left alone in the blackness.

She sat down on wet stone. The simple movement disorientated her. Where was the door that just a moment ago had been reddened with flame? Directly to her left, or more to the front? She tried carefully to recreate, in her mind, the sequence of sitting. Then stood to do it again, in the darkness, slipping onto one knee.

The door, she knew, was about forty or fifty yards away, and as many feet above her. But by now she no longer knew whether it was before or behind her.

The east was already streaked with pale lemon-yellow light. From the hillside, Adam and Jack Abbeline watched the distant core of black-red flame several ridges away to the dark north. Lacoste, coming up to stand next to them, followed their gaze. 'The Martelle Hills. Thick Parasol pines. Late in the season for a forest fire,' he said. 'But it's like grain and rats. Where you have tourists you have fires.'

She knew she had to keep a grip on reality. The image of animals sharing the darkness with her would not leave her. She was compelled by fear to keep moving. In the total

darkness she began to crawl. Everything around her was rock, damp, slithery rock. Every movement brought her into contact. Rock brushed her face and thudded against her hip. Rock tore at her hands and cut her knees.

She began counting. Seconds that she added to make minutes, minutes to quarter-hours. Then she would rest and sob with hopelessness and crawl again. Perhaps for two hours. Perhaps for three.

When she was too exhausted to move further she chose a place to stop. Feeling, caressing the invisible rock with her hands, she found a place to sit. Instinct told her not even to try to imagine the shape of the darkness around her. She must do something, anything, however useless, to keep mad panic at bay. Reaching forward, she swept the rock surface until she found some loose stone. Then, collecting a small pile in front of her, she placed one after the other in line, each representing a day or night since Friday when she had left London and flown to Paris. Five stones were arranged in front of her, making this Sunday night, perhaps Monday morning.

Of course there was the gap in time when she was unconscious. She calculated that to have been nine or ten hours. Certainly she was sure they had travelled south from Paris. In one single memory of drifting back into consciousness she was being carried from the white van, the sun on her face, outcrops of rock rising on all sides, a southern bite of wild rosemary in the air. In the darkness this moment of consciousness on her journey here seemed infinitely important. Treasuring the scrap of information as if it might slip away into the blackness, she began to think of the map of France, the possibilities of high hills or mountains south of the Loire.

So she was somewhere at least four or five hundred kilometres south of Paris, south of Limoges or Lyon even. Probably in the Midi-Pyrenees or Provence.

With a suddenness that surprised her she burst into tears. The five stones in the darkness seemed such a pathetic link with reality; her deductions about the region totally useless in finding help. What did it matter where she was? What did it matter whether this was Sunday or Monday, this month or next?

But there was no comfort in tears either. She snatched up the stones and hurled them into the blackness. With a rattle they rebounded off rocks and fell to the ground. But one, after what seemed a four- or five-second lapse, bounced off some rock-face far, far below her

She stiffened with fear. Reaching out carefully, she found a stone, larger than any she had used before. Steadying herself with one hand on the ground, she threw the stone, not far, no more than a few yards from her.

In silence she counted. Two, three, four, five seconds before it struck rock far below, bounced and slithered and was still. Fearfully, she repeated what she had done, this time tossing the stone out just two or three feet in front of her.

There was no room for doubt. She was crouched no more than the slightest movement away from the edge of a hundred-foot drop.

Collecting stones, throwing them one by one in front of her to check the ground, she began to crawl away from the cliff-edge. When she was sure she had gone far enough to be safe, she rolled herself into a ball, her back to a flat surface of rock, and lay, her eyes open in the darkness, wondering how long she could survive the damp, penetrating cold and

the utter desolation of the silent darkness.

Abbeline stood with Adam outside Lacoste's command vehicle in the cool of the Provençal dawn. He had lit a cheroot and was blowing smoke into the greying darkness. Inside the vehicle the radio crackled on low. From time to time a message, laced with the hiss of static, came in from one of the units in the hills, each one reporting that it had drawn a blank. Leaning with his back against the command truck, one knee raised so that his heel hooked onto the top of a wheel, Adam watched the slow progress of the dawn light across the sky. 'In a couple of hours' time,' he said, his eyes still on the encroaching dawn light, 'someone in authority will arrive at his desk in Paris or Marseille and start calculating the cost of using thousands of men on what could prove a wild-goose chase. Some gendarmerie general will be saying: "We have to face the possibility that Steven Viklas has already slipped through the cordon. That he's taken Claire Garrison right out of the area." Isn't that how it works?'

Abbeline nodded. 'That's how it works the world over. As long as there's no further crisis in the area, Lacoste will be able to keep his men on the road blocks for a while longer But from now on it'll begin to get tight. There are going to be calls from other directions. We have to pray for no student demonstrations, no visiting dignitaries needing a two-hundred-man escort, no local team lined up to play Liverpool or Tottenham Hotspur from England. Demonstrators, dignitaries and football fans don't like to think about it, but that's the way it works.'

In her dream she was a student again, swaying rapturously with hundreds, thousands of others, arms waving over their heads,

laughing, enjoying the music from the band on the strobe-lit stage. Out on the edge of the great crowd she knew Steven Viklas was waiting, but for now she was safe, surrounded by friends. Dreamlike, even danger held no dangers.

Sleep and wakefulness merged and separated. But through both, the music seemed to persist She was sitting up now, her hands feeling the rough rock, assuring herself in the blackness that she was awake.

The rock scratched her knuckles. The rock scraped the palms of her hands. Her knees throbbed when she crawled. But the music persisted.

She was fully awake now. Fatigue was thrown off. She stood up, but knew she dare not move in the darkness. The music was distant but getting closer. French accordion music. With it, she even recognised the harsh, vibrant voice of Edith Piaf She was convinced that she had been touched by madness.

Then the whole cavern exploded with light.

From where she stood she watched in wonder. A pleasure boat roped and looped with coloured lights was moving across the surface of a lake a hundred feet below her. Coloured searchlights on the bow threw beams of gold and green across the rock roof. Stalagmites loomed and fled into yawning shadow. Edith Piaf belted out, to this weird world, her song to Milord.

For a moment or two the cliff-edge sparkled with yellow light. She stumbled forward, her voice cracking cries for help. At the edge of the chasm she stopped, looking down towards the boat. People were dancing on the rear section. The searchlight passed by her, and another, pale blue, returned.

In the soft blue glow she waved her hands above her head, wildly, as she had in her dream. Straining the muscles in her

throat, she croaked out a harsh cry for help.

Leaning on the aft rail of the boat, someone waved back.

Then music and light were gone as suddenly as they came. And the despair and desolation were worse than anything she could possibly have imagined.

39

First light filled the window when Albert Solonge awoke on Monday morning in his small apartment in Salernes. His first reaction was that he felt no ill effects of last night. The second reaction, following on swiftly, was that he was about to throw up. Turning his head slowly, he watched the trees on the bedroom wallpaper undulate. The eighteenth-century figures hunting with their dogs in the woods seemed to have been granted movement. He focused on the soft green light of the digital clock beside his bed and registered that it was still not five o'clock. He closed his eyes. He knew that if he could ignore his desperate thirst he might fall back to sleep for enough time for the worst to wear off. He lay unmoving in the bed, wrapped in a sense of guilt he lacked the energy to understand. Mermaids occupied his thoughts.

As Monday began for Captain Lacoste, he stood before the operations map in his office, his eyes rimmed with red, dark smudges beneath, and gave orders to extend the area of the search until it included the more distant hills and valleys behind Salernes. Regional television news broadcasts carried the story of the search. All local mayors now had copies of the computer-aged pictures of Zoya Viklas and her son. In the hills, farmers driving tractors or battered pick-ups were questioned at road blocks. Helicopters from the Gendarmerie

de l'Air unit at Marseille were landing at remote farmhouses. Post offices in twenty small towns had been contacted but nobody could recall a delivery to anybody named Viklas. Every known builder in the area, amateur or registered, was being asked about a repair job to a roof commissioned by an old lady in the early summer.

Lacoste worked himself and his men relentlessly. In his office in Salernes, eating soup and pâté and drinking red wine for what he called an Anglo-Saxon breakfast, Lacoste reassigned squads as they came off each duty, pushing them to complete coverage of this village or that area of wood and broken hillside. From Lacoste, more than from anybody, Adam understood how little time there was if Claire was to be found alive.

During the morning, Tom phoned again from London, sober this time, again offering to come out to France to help in the search for Claire. 'There's nothing for you to do here,' Adam told him.

'I don't mind what I do – talk to the press, anything . . .'

Adam swallowed hard. 'I'll contact you the moment there's something to report.'

'Just tell me exactly where you are,' Tom Garrison said. 'I've been cut free here. I could be down there in a matter of hours.'

Adam forced himself to speak calmly. 'Stay where you are,' he said. 'Best you handle things at that end.' He would much sooner have told the truth, that he couldn't stand the thought of his brother's company, couldn't stand the thought of Tom being involved in the search for Claire. Perhaps some time he would tell Tom what he thought of him. Not now.

As Adam put down the phone, Lacoste was tapping urgently on the glass window to the office. Abbeline pulled

open the door. Lacoste's thick eyebrows were raised He was pointing through the open door to the command vehicle standing outside. 'It's the Sapeurs Pompiers,' he said. A metallic radio voice from inside the vehicle was repeating details of a woman's body recovered from an extinguished house fire up on the Martelle ridge.

Lacoste's jeep led a convoy of gendarmerie vehicles out of Salernes on the Martelle road. 'They doused the fire last night,' Lacoste said, 'apparently thinking it was an empty ruin. They were just pleased it hadn't spread to the woods around.'

'What do they think caused it?' Abbeline asked.

'In this weather they don't have to look far. Sun on a piece of bottle glass is enough to start a slow burn. By nightfall you've got a blaze.'

'They had no reason to think anyone was living there?'

Concentrating on the road ahead, Lacoste shook his head. 'The village is a mile away. The mayor says there are thirty or forty old ruins in the woods up there, some of them not more than half a chimney stack or a pile of stones in the middle of thorn bushes. He checked what he thought were the most probable ones.'

'And the body was found this morning?'

'When the Chief came back with the mayor to write up his fire report. Somebody poking about in the ruin found the body. Badly burned, but definitely an old woman.'

At a crossroads the convoy took a smaller track up to the top of the ridge and swung up a narrow pathway where a uniformed fireman directed them. They climbed between thick juniper bushes that swished along the sides of the jeep, then burst into a large sunlit clearing. The acrid smell of

wet, burnt wood hit Adam as they slowed to a halt in the puddled courtyard beside an ambulance. Two red fire vehicles flanked all that was left of the house, a mound of rubble and broken tiles from which blackened beams stuck out at all angles. One of the vehicles, a small red mobile crane, was piling beams beside the ruin. Several helmeted firemen were working in the blackened mess of burnt wood and stone and tile.

The fire officer came up to Lacoste and shook hands. Adam and Jack Abbeline were introduced. 'An empty ruin,' the fire officer said. 'We had no reason to think it was anything else. We were wrong.'

Adam looked towards what remained of the house. It was as if he had stopped breathing. 'There's no sign of anyone else?'

The fire officer shook his head. 'We're taking it apart stone by stone, plank by plank '

'You've got down to the cellar?'

'It's full of debris, of course, and the sides have collapsed, but there's no one there, monsieur.'

Adam turned to Abbeline. 'I suppose he might have fired the place before he left.'

'With his mother in it?' Abbeline said.

Adam's eyes were hard. 'Why not, if Midas's death ruined everything for him.'

Lacoste had come back from the ambulance. 'It's Zoya,' he said. 'The face is still recognisable. The doctor says at a quick guess her neck was broken. Before the fire.'

Adam turned away and walked to the edge of the clearing. From where he stood, higher than the rubble, he could look down and make out the shape of the small house, no more than two rooms and a roof which had collapsed into the cellar.

Part of one wall and most of the stone chimneypiece still stood, but that was all. Abbeline and Lacoste had climbed down to cellar level where the firemen were shovelling through the piles of stone and wet ash and limestone dust. The picture of Claire chained to the wall was in front of Adam's eyes. He knew with certainty it was this cellar. But there was now no sign of Claire, no sign of Viklas.

He turned away. It was at times like this he wished he still smoked. His stomach churned at the thought that this was the place where Claire had been held, this remote hovel with its courtyard, now muddied and criss-crossed with tyre-marks. In the bright sunlight his tired eyes followed one double line of marks and then another. When he looked up he found he was peering into the wood.

He frowned and walked forward. It was as if one of the fire trucks had backed deep into the trees. On the far edge of the muddy area there was crushed vegetation. He moved again. The wood took over beyond a low dry-stone wall. But the tyre-marks continued through a gap and far into the trees. He jumped the wall and walked slowly forward, ducking under the leafy overhang. The tyre-marks continued where a path had once run. He stopped, peering into the shadows of rocks and old pines. Patches of sunlight dappled the white limestone outcrops. Light caught the bright green of a younger bush. Something glinted.

He moved forward again a few yards. He was already in the thick undergrowth. Another angle: the glint of sunlight on metal. On chrome.

He crashed forward through the bushes. A black BMW stood among the trees. Through the windshield he could see clearly that Viklas was at the wheel.

He could almost hear the engine burst into life, almost

see the BMW begin to move, so strong was his expectation of the car leaping towards him. As he stood in its path, the voices of the firemen far behind him were distanced by the unreality of the silent, unmoving car.

Through the speckled sunlight he started slowly towards the car. Viklas, he could see, had both hands on the wheel, his lips drawn back in a savage, threatening smile.

He reached the side of the BMW. The driver's window was down. The smell of burning flesh and clothing rose to his nostrils. One side of the face was badly burned, the lips stretched taut across the teeth, the dead eyes glazed. The hands were loose, the black fingers crooked like talons on the wheel.

But no passenger. No sign of Claire.

40

Albert Solonge woke later that Monday morning with a sick headache and a throbbing sense of guilt. He knew it was the worst hangover he had ever experienced. He found no improbability in believing he was about to die. His heart and head thumped in a deadly unison; the bed was soaked in sweat. He had got up to go to the bathroom and barely made it before beginning to vomit until he was trembling with weakness.

He had gone back to bed and slept for another few hours to wake again sometime in the mid morning. Then coffee, some soup and bread, and an hour of ill-focused TV before he was driven back to bed again.

Now, in the early afternoon, he looked at the world differently. He took a shower and felt his head clearing. In the mirror his eyes were no longer glazed.

He wasn't due at the garage until mid afternoon to check over his thirty-tonne Berliet *camion* with the mechanics, before driving north tonight to Lille to pick up a consignment of refrigerators. The day was beginning to look better. Albert Solonge was beginning to feel better. But he was still troubled by a disturbing sense of something left undone, or worse something done which shouldn't have been done. If he thought about it his head ached again.

When he finished dressing he switched on the TV and

threw himself on the couch. The local news was more of the same stories he vaguely remembered from this morning. The most severe drought since the birth of Christ and some heiress they were searching the hills for. His mind drifted to the winning match last March. That beautiful run down the left wing by Barzou . . . that spectacular tackle by Chastrusse. But still, lingering as he drifted off to sleep, was that undefined sense of something unfinished . . . undone.

When he shook himself awake twenty minutes later it was still irking him. He thought about the girls on the trip. Had he made a fool of himself with one of them? Hell, it couldn't have been that serious. Everybody was enjoying themselves, fooling about, girls as well. And you don't go on a rugby trip and expect to be treated like a nun. He got up, splashed his face with water and walked down to the garage.

Monsieur Cappello, his boss, was not in today. He put his head round the office door, just to say *bonjour*, just to make his presence known to Madame. Madame Cappello was twenty-five years younger than her husband. Dark hair, dark eyes, very fruity. Usually she flashed Albert the sort of smile that would brighten the day. But not this afternoon. 'You look bad,' she said, and walked back into the inner office. As he watched her go, a thought struck him. He took a deep breath. Christ! He hadn't done something there, had he?

When he had checked the truck he walked down into town to have an early supper at the bistro. Jean-Luc, his number-two driver, was already there. '*Putain*,' he said, 'this morning they could have carried me away without a word of complaint.'

Albert sat down at the table. 'Me too.' He signalled the

waiter for a Pernod. When it came he poured water to the top of the glass.

'It's still with you, uh?'

'No.' Solonge shook his head. 'But something's nagging me. Listen, the boss wasn't down at the garage today. And Madame looked pretty tight-faced. I didn't do anything . . . you know . . .' He gestured with his clenched fist . . . 'anything to offend her on the trip?'

'You were too far gone to do anything to offend any woman.'

'You know what I'm talking about.'

'Let's order or we'll be late starting,' Jean-Luc said. 'If it puts your mind at rest, Cappello was off to the dentist today.'

'Thank Christ . . .'

'And the only woman you had the balls to be after was some mermaid you said you'd seen waving from the rocks.'

She had eaten nothing since Saturday but she felt no pangs of hunger. She was too weak to move, even if, now, there was any point in moving. She had stopped thinking of the blood she had lost from a hundred tearing cuts from the sharp edges of invisible rocks. Even the gash on her leg, deep enough for blood to have welled through her fingers as she had tried to staunch it, she no longer thought about. Wetness was everywhere, in puddles underfoot or dripping hard, cold drops from the high darkness. Once, hours or eons ago, when she was still trying to move forward, she had slipped and rolled and been engulfed in icy water so shocking to her weakened system that she had floated below the surface, losing the will to survive. Then something, sudden panic, came to her aid. She kicked out, a wild, weak movement that brought her to the surface

again; and a piece of jagged rock at hand had offered itself. Was it then she had torn her leg as she pulled herself out? Was it then or long before? Whenever . . .

Now she no longer moved. Lying, knees tucked up to her lips, unable to feel even the cold of minutes, hours before, Claire Garrison fought one tiny final battle with her body. As her eyelids pressed down she summoned every ounce of strength and pushed to avert what she well knew would take just a few sleeping seconds.

The fifty blue-overalled gendarmes in the briefing-room fell silent as they watched Captain Lacoste enter the large bare room with the English detective and the American with the drawn features. 'You've all seen the maps,' he said. 'First and foremost we are interested in the immediate area around the house. Then the wood along the ridge. You're looking for everything. Woman's clothing, a body, a shallow grave. *Allons-y*, we've a lot of ground to cover.'

Through Lacoste's office window Adam watched people slipping furtively through the entrance gates to the gendarmerie. All day there had been a steady stream of villagers coming in to report odd happenings, strange habits of their neighbours, mysterious lights seen in the hills . . . Sometimes the report was an actual sighting of Claire. Strangely, she was often described, blonde hair flowing, riding freely with Viklas in an open-topped car. Somewhere there, Adam thought, lay the deep fantasies or perhaps envies of us all.

What baffled Adam most was the sequence of events after Zoya arrived back at the farmhouse from Midas's island. If, in his fury, Viklas had attacked her and a fire had started during the struggle, then why was there no sign of Claire in

the rubble? Not for the first time he allowed himself a surge of hope. Was it possible that Zoya had returned to the house and released Claire? Was that the reason Viklas had attacked Zoya in a fit of murderous anger? And if Claire had been released, was she wandering the densely wooded ridge now?

Or had Claire never been held in the cellar of that house. Had the room in the picture sent to Midas been part of a cave of some sort. The photograph seemed to show rough-hewn walls, but then every cellar in the area had the same rough walls. Was she perhaps still alive, chained underground? He walked into the outer office where he remembered a tourist map pinned to the notice-board, a colourfully drawn illustration of the *grottes* in the area, the long limestone cave systems that ran under much of the region. He raised his arm and traced with his finger the long cave that ran back and forth under the Martelle Hills. Abbeline had come over to stand next to him. 'It's possible,' he said, nodding. 'But Lacoste says there's fifty, a hundred kilometres of caves winding back and forth under these hills. Some you have to crawl through, some open up to the size of railway stations. We'd need two, three hundred men just to make a start. Lacoste just doesn't have that number available.'

Outside the Gendarmerie Albert Solonge swung the great truck into the station entrance and applied the brakes with a violent hiss of air. A blue gendarmerie van was backing out of the station garage. Through the open window Adam watched it brake to a halt and the uniformed driver slid back the door and hung out so that he could shout up to the cab six feet above him.

'I want to see the Chief,' Solonge yelled down, leaning from the cab of the Berliet. 'I've got something to report.'

'A fucking mermaid,' Jean-Luc shouted from the seat next to him. 'He thinks he saw a mermaid down in the caves. Let him report it, and get it over with. We're supposed to pick up in Lille before dawn.'

Inside the Gendarmerie, Captain Lacoste, tearing at a baguette, was checking the reports of sightings that had come in in the last hour. 'Captain,' Adam said at his office door, 'I think you should hear this one.'

'What is it?' Lacoste was on his feet, brushing dry his moustache.

Adam gestured the truck driver forward. 'His name's Solonge. Albert Solonge. He's just recovered from what he claims is the worst hangover on record.'

'He saw a mermaid,' the station sergeant said from the corridor.

'In the caves,' Adam said.

Lacoste's thick eyebrows rose. 'Sit down, take it slowly and take it from the beginning,' he said to the beefy young man opposite him. He glanced at Abbeline to see if he had understood, then looked back at the young man. 'All right, Monsieur Solonge. A mermaid. Tell us.'

'Rugby night,' Albert Solonge said. 'Rugby night comes once a year. And this year we won the regional championship.'

'I'm aware of that,' Lacoste said.

'We celebrated. As we got higher up the competition, the supporter's club raised more money. By the time we won we could have flown the team wives and girlfriends to New York for dinner.'

'You didn't.'

'No. It was decided we should hire the tourist boat.'

'What tourist boat?'

'The one that travels the underground river.'

'Ah . . .' Lacoste turned to Adam and Jack Abbeline. 'La Styx is the longest known cave system in the area. With its own underground river navigable for over ten kilometres from a point somewhere below the forest of Bertrac to the Martelle Hills. Go on, Albert.'

Solonge rolled his shoulders inside his jacket. 'We took the lift down to the pier early Sunday evening and chugged the ten kilometres along to the underground lake where the river rises. At the beach we got off, set up big lights, tables and barbecues and cooked dinner. Foie gras, grilled trout, beefsteaks, cheese, *tarte aux pommes*. We brought half a stère of olive wood and had that blazing by the water's edge. Light flickering off the stalagmites - it was magic! By the end of it we'd all drunk a skinful, girls as well. Myself I started at eleven that morning and didn't finish till I got back home. Cognac can pull you down harder than any rugby pack.'

'So you were drunk when the boat started back along the underground river.'

'Very. But what I saw, I saw. It wasn't an illusion. A woman standing right up on the cliff-edge, waving to me.'

'How far away were you?' Adam asked him.

'Fifty metres. Not more.'

'And nobody else saw her?'

'Everybody was dancing, fooling about. The crew were worried crazy someone was going to fall overboard. Nobody else mentioned seeing her as far as I remember.'

'She could have been a pot-holer. Why did you think it important enough to come to the police?'

'It took time to sink in. The local news today. The kidnap of that American woman doctor. Is that right?'

'It's right, Albert.' Lacoste nodded.

'So when my head cleared enough . . .'

'You thought this just might be her.'

'Standing up there naked.'

'Naked?'

'That's what I thought I saw. But maybe she had clothes, a few shreds.' He flushed red. 'Listen, Captain, I was very drunk. And the light was only on her for a few moments. Am I wasting your time?'

'I don't think so, Albert.' Lacoste was already picking up the phone. 'I think you saw Claire Garrison. Too bad you didn't report it last night.'

Solonge shrugged again, uneasy now that he had not come to the police before. 'You know what it is when you're drunk, messieurs. A mermaid. I thought she was waving hello. *Putain*! What a fool! I hope you find her.'

They decided to lower the body of Claire Garrison down to the level of the river where resuscitation equipment was brought in by launch. The police rescue team, now abseiling with the stretcher down the cliff, had failed to detect a pulse. By the time she was put aboard the launch at river level, the doctors were already working to see if revival was possible.

Outside the great cavern, at a place high above the road, teams of gendarmes abandoned their search for a shallow grave in the woods as the ambulance carrying Claire Garrison raced through the night towards the hospital at Martelle.

41

At Joseph Midasov's villa a few kilometres from the hospital where Claire had been taken, Calixte Sorel welcomed Adam and took him into Midas's lamplit study. 'Join me in a glass of wine, Monsieur Garrison. I recorked some of the unused bottles from the night of Midas's last party. I've been drinking it ever since.' He gestured to the bottle. 'Cheval Blanc '61.' He lifted a finger in the air. 'It is not normally given to mere mortals to savour such a glass of wine.'

'I've heard Midas was a connoisseur,' Adam said.

Calixte smiled. 'In general wine was used to impress Midas's taste in film stars. He liked them younger than the wine.'

Adam accepted a glass of wine and sniffed it, raising his eyebrows to Calixte. 'I suppose we should be drinking to Midas,' he said cautiously.

Calixte twirled the wine in his glass. 'I see no reason to,' he said, examining the colour of the wine.

'To you he was nothing more than an employer?'

'What else?'

'Yet you gave him your loyalty for nearly thirty years.'

'He gave me my salary for precisely the same length of time.'

Adam nodded. 'And yet I thought there was friendship there.'

'No . . .' Calixte put his nose into the glass and breathed in deeply. 'Ah,' he said. He looked up at Adam. 'Joseph Midasov was not a man to admire. Or to like. Not a man it was safe to offer friendship to. I believe that was also the conclusion you came to, Monsieur Garrison.'

'Perhaps. But Claire you felt differently about.'

'Of course. She was a small child when Midas first employed me.'

'Did you know her mother?'

'A fine lady. But Midas was determined she would never be allowed to bring up her child.'

Adam watched the Algerian's face, mahogany-coloured in the lamplight. 'Why did you ask me to come here, Calixte?'

'I have been meditating on the question of loyalty, monsieur.'

'And what have you concluded?'

'Midas still pays my salary. Or his Foundation does, for the moment.' Calixte sipped the wine, rolled it on his tongue and smiled his pleasure.

'Does that mean your loyalty is now to the Foundation in New York?'

'In a sense, I suppose. But Madame Claire owns the Foundation.'

'So your loyalty is to her.'

Calixte nodded, walked across and poured Adam more wine. 'My problem, monsieur, is how to express that loyalty.'

'I don't understand you.'

The old secretary sat on one of the upright chairs and turned his glass between his long brown fingers. He was staring down at the unlit logs in the grate. 'I trust you, Monsieur Garrison. As a friend of Madame Claire.'

'You've got something to tell me?'

'Yes. First, let me tell you that Madame Claire called here from the hospital.'

'Tonight?' Adam said incredulously. 'Claire called you?'

Calixte inclined his head. 'Yes. Within an hour or two of regaining consciousness.'

'How was she? How did she sound?'

Calixte shrugged gently.

'What did she call for?'

'She instructed me to collect up all the keys in the house, to lock any private files, any work files that Midas might have left open, to lock his desk and to check that the safe was securely locked.'

'Were you able to tell if anything was missing?'

'Everything was locked as Midas always kept it. Nothing was missing.'

'What else did she ask you to do?'

'Her instructions were that I was to resist any attempt by any member of the Foundation, however senior, to take the keys. And that if the police required documents they were to be referred to her.' Calixte let the wine dribble into his throat, making faint grunting noises of enjoyment.

'Did the police ask for documents?'

'I told them the files were locked.'

'And that only Madame Claire knew the whereabouts of the various keys.'

He swallowed wine. 'Of course. Those were my instructions. I, in any case, doubt that Joseph Midasov would have left anything too terrible in his files. Even in his safe.' He stood up and put down his glass. 'Come with me, please, Monsieur Garrison . . .'

They walked out into the night air. It was as full of scent here on the island as it was on the inland hills, but with an

added taste of salt on the light sea breeze. They crossed to a ground-floor apartment set into one of the wings of the main villa and entered a room richly hung with wall rugs and lit with low lamps that glittered on brass. 'My own quarters,' Calixte said.

He held aside a hanging carpet and set a key into a small safe concealed behind it. Opening the safe, he drew out a battered briefcase, so old the hide was torn in parts showing rough, dusty orange patches in the leather.

Adam stood in the middle of the room watching him. He could smell the faint tang of hashish mingling with the cologne Calixte wore.

'I decided, during my meditations on the subject of loyalty, that you should have this. Look at it when you leave here.'

'What is it?'

He hesitated, his lips pursed. 'My insurance policy, perhaps. It was difficult for a man, or a woman, to retain any independence around Joseph Midasov. He consumed independence.'

'What form does your insurance take?'

'A photocopy I took of some of Midas's most interesting papers.' Calixte smiled. 'Records of Brogula.'

'So you've known, for many years?'

'What part Joseph Midasov played at the camp?' He paused. 'Yes, I knew.'

'How did he get away with it, Calixte, for all these years?'

'He spent money freely. And I've no doubt, after the fall of the Soviet Union, he managed to suppress any undesirable information in the central files.'

'But there must have been survivors who could denounce him.'

'You say that with confidence, monsieur. But last year the Murmansk tracing group Memorial tried to contact survivors of Gulags throughout the whole Kola Peninsula. Survivors from Stalin's day. Thousands upon thousands of men and women passed through those camps. But Memorial succeeded in tracing only a handful of people still alive in Murmansk. Joseph Midasov's camp numbered a few thousand men and women. Most of the survivors died within a few years of their release.'

Midas never knew you had a copy of his Brogula records?'

'Never.'

'And Claire? Did you tell her on the phone tonight?'

The Algerian lifted his head away. 'Yes,' he said, at length. 'I told her there exists the means to break free of Midas for ever.'

'She didn't thank you for that.'

'No. I told her I would entrust these papers to you.'

Adam frowned. 'Why me?'

'She is Midas's daughter. She is not in a true position to decide what should be done with what I have given you. I am too old to decide. Perhaps you will give them to her. Perhaps you'll destroy them. Perhaps you'll publish them. Whatever is best for her.' He handed Adam the tattered briefcase. 'The decision is yours, monsieur.'

In the 1880s the hospital building had been a military *caserne*. Its conversion to a hospital a hundred years later had entailed the ripping up of the parade ground and the planting of gardens in a formal French fashion, the gravelled walks arranged around a stone *bassin* from which a small bronze Cupid leapt, one foot trailing in the water. But the ghosts of the military were still there. The roll of honour. The canon

carved in stone above the entrance. The glass engraved with flags and drums. Kate Kavanagh stood in the massive doorway as Adam approached. 'I feel as if I should present arms,' she said.

'How is she?' Adam said, kissing her on the cheek.

'She had a bad couple of days, but she's coming out the other side.'

There was something in her voice. A drawing-out of words to suggest uncertainty. 'What is it, Katie?' he asked.

They entered the hospital lobby and Kate led the way past leather chairs arranged around low tables. 'She's through the first stage. Physically she's coming along fast.'

'But?'

Kate shrugged. 'You know something about abductions.'

He nodded.

'Maybe this one is even more complicated,' she said. 'At any age it's hard to accept that your father's not a hero. Maybe harder at thirty-three than around fifteen when most kids find out, if they're lucky.' She paused.

'Does she know I'm coming?'

'She's been asking for you all day.'

'Okay, let's go in and see her.'

'Not me, Adam. She wants to talk to you alone. Maybe it's all going to happen as it should have happened years ago.'

'We'll see.' He had told her nothing of the briefcase Calixte had given him.

'She's in the garden,' Kate said. 'I'll wait in the car.'

He walked towards the high french doors that led to the rear gardens and turned. 'What happened when Tom saw her?'

'She won't see him,' Kate said. 'I told you, Adam, she

wants to see you. That's all she's interested in.'

To the rear of the hospital a walk of old trees led down to the narrow river. From the far bank, forests of oak and chestnut climbed away in hills that swooped across the landscape, blue-tinged at the distant ridges. She was sitting on a bench in the shade. Even from thirty or forty paces he could see the bruising on her cheekbone, could see an invalid's pallor on her skin. On other days she had a special air of robust femininity, but now there were signs of fatigue even in the small movements she made to face him. She smiled, wan, wry but, to him, painful because he could feel the effort she was making. 'Hi,' she said. 'Come and sit down.'

He sat down beside her and took her hand for a few moments. 'How are they treating you?'

'Good,' she said. 'The doctors say it'll take a few more days and I'll be heading back to normal. They offered me counselling but I told them if I needed a therapist I had Katie on tap.' She paused, her eyes focused somewhere beyond him. 'Kate filled me in,' she said, turning back to him. 'My God, Adam . . . thank you.' Her eyes rested on him, warm and yet somehow distant.

'Most of all you have to thank a rugby-playing trencherman named Albert Solonge. And a gendarme captain who wouldn't give up.'

'I suppose you think me ridiculous, not seeing the danger after what happened to Corby?'

He shook his head. 'No, Claire, I don't think you at all ridiculous.'

She tossed the hair from her eyes, unconvinced. 'Jack Abbeline was here this morning,' she said, changing the

subject. 'The police have no further interest in the case.'

'In the sense that there can be no trial, sure.'

'In all senses. It's closed.'

He picked up the note of finality in her voice. He was thinking of the briefcase Calixte had given him. He knew she was thinking of it too.

He looked at her pale face and the dark smudges under her eyes and tried to guess how many pounds she'd lost. 'Kate said you were asking to see me,' he said.

'Of course I wanted to see you.'

He felt he had to say it now. 'Because Calixte told you he was passing the Brogula records to me?'

She didn't try to lie. 'Yes,' she said. 'They belong to me now, Adam. They're somewhere safe?'

'At my hotel.'

A frown passed quickly across her forehead. 'Will you get them for me. Today.'

'They're okay where they are, Claire. They're in the hotel safe.'

She breathed in deeply. 'Good,' she said. 'Good. But you'll bring them here.'

'Of course. The records belong to you.' He paused. 'What will you do with them?'

She looked at him in astonishment. 'What do you mean, Adam, what will I do with them?'

He could feel a mounting tension in her. 'We'll talk later,' he said. 'There's plenty of time to decide.'

'There's nothing to decide.' The words were spoken quietly but with a whiplash intensity

He leaned back, placing his arm along the bench-rail. 'There's an argument for getting a statement out to the press now,' he said slowly. 'Your father spent a fortune covering

the truth about his past. But somebody somewhere will unearth it.'

She flinched. 'The truth, as I see it, is that my father was the man he was from the time I knew him. What he was forced to do in the past isn't relevant to that.'

'Forced?'

'A lot of people became guards not from choice, but by conscription.'

'Did they become camp commandants?'

'I'm not going to debate with you, Adam. I want that briefcase. I want to destroy it ' Pale as she was, her look had an implacable quality.

'Claire . . .' He knew he shouldn't be saying this, or at least not at this time, but he pushed ahead. 'Claire. It's time to end the pretence. Your father was an officer of the system you detest. Don't try to protect his memory. Let it come out now.'

Her face was suddenly flooded with colour. 'Let it come out now? Don't you see what you're saying? If it comes out, if the press get hold of it, Viklas will have won! He will have got what he wanted. A public confession.'

'How can he win? He's dead.'

'Do you know what that man did to me?' she said quietly. 'It's not just that I was bludgeoned and thrown into a truck and locked in a set of home-made stocks . . . Not just that I was chained like a dog in a cellar. Not even that he left me to rot in an underground cavern as black as pitch.' She spoke quietly, without self-pity. 'What he did is something I shall never recover from. He terrorised me Reduced me to the gut-wrenching humiliation of pleading for my life. How can you know what that means? And now you're asking me to release those documents to the

press. To concede everything he abducted me for!'

'You'd be conceding nothing that isn't true.'

She stood up, supporting herself on her stick. He reached out to help her but she shook her head. 'I can't believe this,' she said fiercely. 'You're asking me to hand Steven Viklas my father's head on a plate.'

He wanted to say it had nothing to do with a victory for Steven Viklas. He wanted to say that if she didn't release the papers to the press, she was going to have to continue living the life of lies Midas had forced on her. 'You have to break free, Claire,' he said. 'There comes a time when you have to break free.'

'Break free?' She shook her head impatiently.

'Listen to me, Claire, please,' he said. 'You're doing what Midas would have done. You're doing this for him.'

She began to walk slowly towards the hospital. He walked beside her, knowing it was useless to offer his arm. 'Zoya, Steven Viklas . . . they're dead, Claire,' he said. 'Midas too. There's a new life in front of you.' He paused. 'But you have to reach out and take it.'

She was silent with the effort of concentrating on her walking until she reached the end of the gravel path. A nurse was waiting to help her up the few shallow steps of the ornate colonnade that formed the back of the hospital. On the top step, Claire turned back. He was a step or two below her. Her face was unsmiling. 'A new life,' she said. 'But not one that I'm going to build on the denunciation of my father.'

42

At the end of the third week of October the body of Corby Garrison was recovered from the Thames at Vauxhall. That autumn, an unusually heavy storm with winds of over thirty miles an hour had released two bodies trapped in some wartime metalwork beneath the surface in the shallows at Nine Elms bend. The first, a sixty to seventy-year-old man with a liver ravaged by alcohol, was unlikely ever to be identified. Examination by a Thames Division Metropolitan Police doctor established that the second body was that of a young female corresponding in hair colour, height, period of immersion and injuries to the missing girl. She was formally identified by Tom Garrison from the bracelet found on her right wrist.

The funeral took place at Brompton Cemetery on a chilly London day of scudding grey cloud. When the short, grim ceremony was over, the four mourners — the two brothers, Kate and Superintendent Abbeline – walked down the long asphalt paths towards the gatehouse and their waiting cars.

By the two red telephone boxes on the Fulham Road they stopped. Adam turned to his brother. 'We won't be seeing each other again, Tom. I see no reason.'

Kate looked at Adam's tense features and then at Tom, his face crumpled and angry.

'If that's the way you want it,' he said.

Adam turned towards him. 'That's the way I want it, Tom.'

Tom Garrison nodded. He turned away. 'I'll call you some time,' he said to Kate, and walked quickly to the corner of Ifield Road where an embassy car was waiting for him.

Abbeline stood by neutrally, his face expressionless, pale above his dark grey overcoat, his eyes following the disappearing CD plates of the embassy car. Then he turned back to Kate and Adam. 'No sign of Mrs Garrison,' he said. 'Perhaps that's not too surprising.' He paused. 'You've not heard of her, since she discharged herself from hospital?'

Kate shook her head. 'I've been out of the country.'

Abbeline raised his eyes to Adam, who shook his head.

'Do you need to talk to her, Jack?'

Abbeline shrugged. 'Not officially. There are still one or two points I'd like to clear up. Just for my notes. The Foundation offices have been closed here in London. At head office in New York they've issued a press release saying she's taking a prolonged holiday in Italy.'

'But you don't think so?'

They began to walk slowly from the cemetery. Abbeline's car was waiting just in front of where the US embassy car had been parked. 'I'm not looking for her in any official sense,' Abbeline said. 'But I've made one or two enquiries.'

'Without result?' Adam said.

'No. For the moment anyway . . .' He shrugged . . . 'she seems to have just disappeared.'

They sat in a wine bar in the Fulham Road, not two hundred yards from where Corby was buried.

'What will you do, Kate?' Adam asked. 'You won't want to go back to the apartment.'

She shook her head vigorously. 'I've already made

arrangements to move. I'm going to Edinburgh.'

'That professor, what's his name – Macdonald. He's offered you a job?'

'Professor Macdonald has made me a proposition,' she said coolly.

He raised his eyebrows.

'Ian Macdonald is closer to thirty-eight than sixty-eight. We already have the basis of a nice unprofessional relationship. To tell you the truth, it's more proposal than proposition.'

'And you accepted.'

'Without hesitation. When he's ready for details of my unedifying past, I want you to meet him. Claire too.'

'And Tom?'

'Tom's been out of my life a long time. Kate loves Tom is a myth,' she said decisively. 'Let it die a dignified death, Adam.'

She twirled the bottle of Australian Chardonnay by the neck, inspected the label and poured a little more for both of them. 'And you,' she said. 'You feel no wish to see anything of him?'

'It's pointless,' he said. 'I know now that Tom's interest in me ceased long before my interest in him. Tom's been a loner all his life.'

'And you haven't?'

'The difference,' he said, 'is that I've never wanted to be.'

'So you'll go your own ways.'

'You know what I mean, Kate. For me it's a necessity.'

'The only way you can come together with Claire.'

'The only way I can *hope* to come together with Claire.'

'Where is she now, Adam? What's she doing?'

He hunched over the wine glass. 'She has some hard choices to make, Katie. It'll take time.' He paused. 'Or maybe they'll be choices she just won't be able to make. I don't know.'

43

Barely twenty passengers left the Aeroflot flight at Murmansk. Most were sailors rejoining their ships, exchanging banter as they left the plane, complaining at the assault of the bitterly cold air. The woman left the aircraft behind them, descending the aluminium steps into the starlit afternoon darkness of the Arctic north.

They waited while the baggage doors were opened and the cases tossed out onto a frayed trampoline frame which had been positioned to receive them. When her green duffle bag bounced on the trampoline she picked it off the frame and joined the group straggling through the dirty snow towards the lights of the airport building. She wore boots, a long dark cloth coat and a fur-trimmed hat. In heavily gloved hands she carried the duffle bag and a worn briefcase.

Under the stars it was close to minus thirty degrees Centigrade. In the airport building it seemed stifling. Claire passed through a perfunctory Customs inspection and stood in the crowded concourse. There was a tea bar just ahead of her and she crossed the littered concourse floor, bumping shoulders with parting couples, ratings from the navy base at Severomorsk and young soldiers hoping to meet a girl Stopping at the entrance to the bar, she glanced across the sleazy, wet-ringed tables. In her bag she had a bottle of Scotch and sandwiches made up in Sweden. She had not eaten in

the plane, she would wait, she decided, until she got to her hotel.

A small man in a grey anorak and a Canadian lumberjack's cap was bustling towards her, the earpieces of his cap flapping as he moved. He introduced himself as her driver, Vassily, and took her bag. Within minutes they were rolling down the former Lenin Prospekt in an old Soviet Army four wheel drive truck, the canvas sides stiff with frost.

In her hotel room Claire showered, pinned back her hair and put on a shirt and slacks. She watched the long television weather report – twenty-seven degrees of frost but only a light wind – then unpacked her sandwiches and poured herself a glass of Scotch. Sitting on the bed, she pulled the old briefcase towards her. It was the first time she had opened it since the day she had read the contents in the hospital in France.

There, in her hospital room, beginning to read the Brogula day-book, a sense of horror had overwhelmed her. Her first reaction had been to put through a call to Adam. To give him the records and photographs and tell him to pass them to the press immediately. She knew at least that evening that Adam had been right about one thing. It was not Steven Viklas she cared about, not some imagined concern about a victory from beyond the grave. Steven Viklas had proved easier to put behind her than the truth about her father.

But she had not acted immediately. She had not asked Adam to come to the hospital that evening. Instead, in total confusion, she had discharged herself against the wishes of her doctors. She had instructed the Foundation to announce she was on an extended convalescence in Italy. And the next six weeks she had spent horse-riding, day after day alone, at a friend's farm in the foothills of the Andes.

It was those hours out on the hillsides with the high peaks rising in the distance that had slowly cleared her head. By the time she was ready for Europe she had decided exactly what she needed to know to make her decision. About her father – and about that life that Adam claimed lay ahead of her.

Sitting on the bed now, she took the file from the briefcase Carefully laying aside the photographs, she began to leaf through the thick wad of daily reports by Commandant Major J. S. Midasov to his superior officers at MGB, Constitution Square, Murmansk.

An early report on grey paper, crumbling at the edges, the typewriter keys worn or distorted:

January 12, 1949. The fall of snow at Number 3 Mine entrance continues to present difficulties in maintaining production norms. I have today ordered rescue work to cease and transferred labour to the new shaft opening on south hill. I beg to remind the Ministry that this month we are already 45 men short of full complement.

August 29, 1949. Despite unusually high dysentery death rates this month (see monthly appel sheet), production has exceeded norm by over 5 per cent. I beg to inform the Ministry that we shall be over sixty men short of full complement by monthly report date.

December 14, 1957. The 25 prisoners (prison numbers attached) involved in the attempted withdrawal of labour in Mine Shaft 4 have been sentenced to death by shooting. The three prisoners (prison numbers attached) apprehended smuggling gold from Mine Shaft 16 were hanged this morning.

Sipping her Scotch, in a state of numb anguish, Claire forced herself to read on. The record showed day after day of misery and suffering inflicted on nameless *zeks*. And each day's agony was recorded above her father's scratched signature. But was the truth that he had had no choice but to write the brief, cold notes he had written? Was the truth that somewhere concealed in these bleak statements of punishments and deaths, production norms and labour shortfalls, there had been efforts to ease the lot of his charges? Efforts of an essentially humane man which could never appear in these records? But real efforts nevertheless?

She had read a thousand such reports from other camps, written by other camp commanders. She had never thought to take them at other than their face value. But there must have been men who hated the system they had administered. Men who tried in perhaps small but important ways to grant some ease to the *zeks* in their camps.

Had her father been one of these men? He had, after all, been one of the very few, possibly the only, commandant to defect. That surely was a measure of his unwillingness to maintain the system that destroyed men and women for their labour.

Adam might have been right about Steven Viklas, but he could still be wrong about her father. Perhaps his answers were too simple. He had not considered the possibility that all the time Midas was fighting *against* the system.

It was the reason she had come to Murmansk. She had to know exactly why her father had defected before she could decide what to do with the documents scattered on the bed before her.

She slept badly that night and rose early, finishing the last of her sandwiches for breakfast. From the window, she

watched the busloads of women workers, muffled against the cold, being dropped at the huge *rybokombinat*, the fish processing plant. Along the street outside the workers' tower blocks, her eye followed the line of flaring braziers set at bus stops to prevent people freezing to death on the way to work. Everything in this harsh climate she related to Brogula, and the tiny, lethal world her father had ruled for ten years.

The director of the Murmansk group, Memorial, had offered all possible co-operation. Their self-imposed task was to record the Gulag network on the Kola Peninsula, and they had worked closely with the Midas Foundation in the past. Their first report was that they knew no more about Brogula than that it was one of several smaller gold and diamond mining camps administered separately from the main Gulag network. No survivors had been traced in the Murmansk region, although Memorial had no doubt there were still a hundred or two old men and women scattered throughout the former Union. They had established only that Brogula had been closed down, for unknown reasons, over thirty-five years ago; all details of prisoners and administration in the files of MGB, Murmansk had been removed. The camp had a name, but that was all.

Then, just a week before she left Argentina, a letter arrived from the director of Memorial. They believed they might have traced one man, a survivor of many camps, who had been a prisoner at Brogula when it had been closed down.

Vassily, her driver, called for her at eight o'clock. She was waiting in the hotel lobby, her bag packed, her bill paid. She had no intention of coming back that night.

The jeep moved swiftly through the brightly lit outskirts of Murmansk. Beyond the last street lamps the pale blur in the eastern sky provided just enough light to show a

snowscape of low hills, the lines of roads through them visible where other vehicles had travelled before. The tiny circle of torchlight on the map on her knees showed roads to Revda, Monchegorsk and from there running due south to Brogula.

She felt her mouth go dry. Fifty, perhaps sixty kilometres. She glanced at Vassily. As they left the city, he concentrated on the icy road, his gloved hands sliding back and forth round the big wheel. 'Have you ever taken people out to the Brogula Hills?' Claire asked him.

'Once or twice,' he said. 'The old monastery there has been rebuilt. Sometimes a priest from Murmansk wants to pay a visit.'

'But nobody ever wants to go to the camp?'

'What is there left to go for? Gold?' He laughed. A gold tooth flashed. 'Most of the small camps have been burnt for fuel. There's nothing left there now.'

The drive was a long process of skidding tyres and a revving engine. There were frequent stops to dig through deep drifts of snow. It was close on midday, but there was no lightening of the sky beyond the grey blur on the horizon. Throughout most of the journey she sat silently, watching the headlights bounce across the snow, trying to imagine what it was like to be forced to spend a lifetime in these dark, empty snowscapes.

By mid morning they had reached the Brogula Hills. The lights of a small monastery burned on the slopes above them. They were ploughing along a narrow track now, undriven on since the last snowfall. Then they rounded a shoulder of white hillside and she could see, from the pale light in the eastern sky, in a sheltered dip among the hills, a square of fencing, one watchtower still standing, and a line of long huts up to the eaves in drifts of snow.

She could not control, or define, the emotion that swept over her. She felt it was a place that barely deserved a name, so bleak and isolated from the world it seemed. Then she brushed the tears from her eyes and looked again.

A light was shining in the hut next to the gate.

Vassily stopped the jeep. 'You're sure you want to go down there?' he said. 'A Westerner should be careful. A young woman even more so.'

She told him to wait where he was, swung open the canvas door of the jeep and stepped down onto the snow The cold was slow and numbing, only gradually taking possession of her as she walked towards the camp gates. By the time she had covered the two hundred yards, the tears in her eyes were misting into a thin film of ice. She blinked quickly to clear them. The temperature in Brogula must have been approaching minus forty degrees.

She reached the hut with the light as the door opened. A heavily bearded man in a black robe motioned to her to come in. She entered an ornately decorated candlelit room with a huge iron stove glowing red in the pipe. 'Father Nikodim?' she asked.

He bowed his head.

'Are you here every day?'

'One of us will be here. We have sworn to maintain this guard-room as a chapel for the Brogula dead.'

She sat down on the single pew he motioned her to, and the priest sat opposite. She took off her hat and gloves and loosened her coat and sat looking past the old man's lined face, at the glowing stove. 'You know,' she said after a few moments, 'that my name is Claire Midasov?'

The old man's face was impassive.

'I asked Memorial, in Murmansk, to help me trace

someone who had been a prisoner at Brogula.'

In the candlelight the priest's face took on a glow from the gold-leaf ıkons. 'I was a prisoner here, a *zek*, for nearly two years until the camp closed.'

She took a deep breath. 'You knew my father.'

'Yes,' he said.

'Will you tell me what sort of a man he was?'

'If you wish.'

She nodded slowly.

The priest shifted in his seat. 'I have reason to be grateful to Joseph Midasov,' he said.

She felt a surge of hope rise in her.

'All of us, prisoners here in those last days of the camp, have reason to be grateful.'

'How so?' she asked, her heart leaping.

'Because his defection resulted in the closing down of the camp.' Hope drained from her like blood.

'I doubt I would have survived another winter,' the old man said. 'Few of us would have.' He paused, watching her, before continuing. 'The gold seam was nearly exhausted. Every quarter-ounce was worth a life that last winter.' He sat silently.

'My father . . .' she prompted him quietly.

'Your father.' The priest nodded. 'I will not pretend to you in order to spare your feelings. You've come a long way for the truth. Is he still living?'

'He died this year.'

'We heard rumours of a Foundation, like Memorial in Murmansk.'

'Yes,' she said.

He nodded to himself.

'Tell me about my father. Why did he defect?'

Nikodim was silent for a long time. 'Fear,' he said finally.

'How could that be?' she asked in a voice little above a whisper.

'Fear,' he said again, nodding vigorously now. 'In that last year everybody knew the gold seams were practically exhausted. Prisoners, guards, everybody but the gentlemen at MGB, Murmansk. They continued to demand he fulfil the norms.'

She waited.

'I worked in the camp office,' the priest said. 'Each week the figures fell, each week a new reprimand came from Murmansk. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was relieved. To be sent where? To Vorkuta perhaps?' He laughed suddenly, unexpectedly.

'Yes, there were worse places than Brogula.' The priest leaned over and took her hand. 'The truth is that Joseph Midasov showed no mercy. Work hours at Brogula were increased again and again. Men and women were driven in the mine-shafts to the point of collapse. Each morning the labour brigades marched to work, lanterns hanging from the long poles on their shoulders. I kept my own record, counting them out and back. The death toll was fearful. Young men died of coronary exhaustion. Young women died of despair Suicide pacts were common. And still Josef Midasov drove them on. Any hesitation to obey orders was punished by nights in the sub-zero *izolator.* Any refusal resulted in a public hanging.'

He patted her hand and let it go. 'As the full force of that winter came upon us,' he said, 'panic reigned in the camp. Production norms were posted in figures of tin on the notice-board. We all knew what was happening. Perhaps your father

took no sadistic pleasure in the *zeks*' suffering. But he was driven by fear.'

'It was Zoya Viklas who suggested to him a way out?'

'She had worked in the mine and had smuggled gold. Not much but enough for the foreign sailors in Murmansk. By this time Midasov had selected her as his mistress and transferred her to the administration block. She worked in the camp office, as I did.'

'Did he betray her?'

The priest paused. 'As a camp officer he was free to go to Murmansk. No doubt he had negotiated his bargain with the foreign sailors before the night of the escape. Perhaps Zoya's gold was insufficient to buy passage for two. More likely, he never intended to take her with him. That, I believe, is the truth. It was said he arranged the diversion: Zoya was caught in the snowfields outside the wire.' The priest bared his teeth. 'By that time he was already boarding a ship to Sweden. Zoya was brought back and beaten in front of us all and thrown into the *izolator*. Only a woman like her could have survived the days that followed.' He paused.

Claire sat watching him, his brown eyes caught in the candlelight.

'Within a few days, officials arrived from Murmansk. There was great confusion. Zoya returned from the *izolator* with twenty or thirty others. We were all assembled on the camp square. A civilian lectured us: we were all responsible for this stain on the penal re-education system. We tried not to laugh because he was obviously sincere. The camp, he said, was to be closed. I honestly believe that he thought that, for us, it was a sad moment. The flag was taken down and the camp dogs were shot. We were fewer than two hundred *zeks* who marched out that last day. I understand

that later, much later, from another camp, Zoya attempted to escape again. Successfully.'

Claire nodded. 'Successfully,' she said.

They sat in silence for a long time.

'And Joseph Midasov,' the priest said, 'did he live a good life in the West?'

She felt he deserved to know. 'Until Zoya Viklas killed him,' she said.

'Zoya Viklas,' the old man said. And even after all these years it was with admiration in his voice.

44

On New Year's Eve, Adam walked down the Boulevard St Michel through the lightly falling snow. He was heading home to change; Jacobi and his wife had invited him to join a few friends at their apartment in St Cloud.

People streamed past him – Parisian family groups, enjoying the crisp bite in the air, young men and girls with their arms around each other, pairs of severe, straight-backed old ladies, their umbrellas rapping the pavement. Along the boulevard, buskers intermixed hymns and jazz, acrobats leapt and tumbled and fire-eaters belched flames. In glass-fronted sidewalk cafés, couples settled down to celebrate the arrival of the New Year.

He looked at his watch and moved on unhurriedly towards the river, stopping from time to time to sniff the hot roasting chestnuts or to examine the barrels of oysters on sale outside the cafés. At the corner of Rue St Séverin he sat in a café window seat and ordered coffee and cognac. He had thought a lot about Claire as Christmas approached. Wondering where she was, how she was. Imagining.

Christmas Day was the point he had set in his mind. But the day had passed; another year loomed. He knew that a new year called for new directions, a new resolution. A few lines from a poem by John Dryden, barely remembered, ran

through his mind: 'It's good the old year is out. Time to begin anew.'

Perhaps it was good, but it didn't feel like it. Somehow he would have to find a way to begin anew.

He glanced out into the street. At a kiosk lit with strings of New Year fairy lights, a *Figaro* delivery van had just pulled up and the driver was handing a raffia-tied pack of newspapers to the woman in mittens behind the high counter.

He drank some coffee, his eyes on the woman with a knife in her mittened hand cutting the raffia on the pack of newspapers. He was thinking about Midas at that very moment, thinking that perhaps what he should have done was to publish the documents without asking Claire. Not burdened her with the impossible choice. Published the documents for the simplest of reasons – that the truth about Midas should be published because it was the truth. Joseph Midasov had bought silence, he had destroyed records, unbalanced already disturbed lives. He had got away with everything too long, too outrageously.

Through the steamy glass of the café terrace he watched the woman's mittened hands turn and slap the bundles of newspapers, then peel off the top half-dozen to slip into wire holders around the kiosk.

It was too dark to read the headline, but the lights of an approaching bus passed slowly across the page. Fleetingly the light touched a picture spread across three or four columns, a face in shadow above the high-collared uniform of an officer of the old Soviet Union.

Adam felt recognition like a charge of electricity. Leaving his coffee, he went out and bought a copy of the paper. Coming back, he spread it on the table in front of him. In the bright lights of the café terrace, Camp Commandant Joseph

Midasov looked grimly back at him above the story of his own disgrace.

The band played 'Beale Street Blues.' Through the double doors into the salon he saw that some of the guests were already dancing – men in dinner jackets, girls in long dresses split to the knee. A few friends, Jacobi had said.

A long table was laden with lobster and salmon. Champagne was offered by maids in black dresses, whisky and soda from a galleried silver tray by Jacobi's butler.

For a few moments Adam took in the noise and colour. He saw Abbeline on the far side of the room with a good-looking dark-haired girl. They were talking to Jacobi by the long balcony windows. He made his way through the guests and was introduced by Abbeline to Jo Saunders. Why did she smile at him like that? Knowingly? And Jacobi too, he thought, was looking smug.

'Never realised,' Abbeline said, waving his champagne glass at gilt mirrors and silk curtaining, 'how well your average French policeman was paid.' Adam raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment, following the movement of Abbeline's hand.

Then he saw Claire.

CAROL BRENNAN

IN THE DARK

Just as the lights dimmed, I heard it. Its androgynous hoarseness was burned into my memory, into my dreams, where I'd hear it, and I'd kill it. Or it would kill me.

Behind her in the cinema is the voice that has haunted Emily Silver's dreams for twenty years. Everyone around her silenced the protests of a small child and told her that her parents weren't murdered, that they killed themselves. But Emily knows better.

Shocked and terrified, Emily reluctantly lets her lover try to discover more about the voice. But when Mike dies suddenly she is propelled on a hunt for the killer. A hunt which takes Emily first to strangers but then back into her past and dangerously close to home . . .

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

STEPHEN COLLINS

EYE CONTACT

He is a perfect, very proper stranger, sitting across the trendy restaurant with his wife.

She is a New York actress whose best performances are off-screen in her dangerous relations with men.

When their eyes meet, Nicolette can tell that he's trying to connect. And she'll make it easy on him.

It has to be that night. No names. And if he doesn't show up he wasn't worth it, because for Nicolette sex must always come with a risk.

What she doesn't know is that this time she's met a man who'll flaunt her rules, violate her anonymity. Pushed to the limit, he'll take her with him. And before he's done, she will stand alone . . . suspected of murder.

'Sensational, scintillating, seductive and *so* sexy.'
Jamie Lee Curtis

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

All of a sudden, Claire Garrison's world is falling apart. Her husband is having an affair. It looks like her closest friend is the woman involved. And trouble is brewing with her work as a researcher for her charismatic but volatile Russian father.

But Claire's problems have only just begun. When the bloodstained clothing of her young sister-in-law is found on the banks of the Thames, a chain of horrifying revelations comes to the surface.

And, as everyone around her seems to have become a stranger, Claire puts her trust in a man she has only just met. Although somehow she senses she's known him all her life.

'A chilling woman-hunt by a man with a nightmarish mind . . . a book you'll find difficult to put down'

Anthony Barwick, author of *Shadow of the Wolf*

CORONET BOOKS
FICTION: GENERAL

ISBN 0-340-61705-5

00499

UK £4.99
Australia $12.95
R.R.P.

9 780340 617052